



# PROTECTING THE LAST KING OF THE JUNGLE

IUCN NL's portfolio of interventions to protect jaguars and  
address illegal wildlife trade in South America



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# Current situation

The jaguar is the largest feline in the American continent and a very valuable symbol for many indigenous cultures.

1973

Year in which the jaguar trade was banned in South America.

18

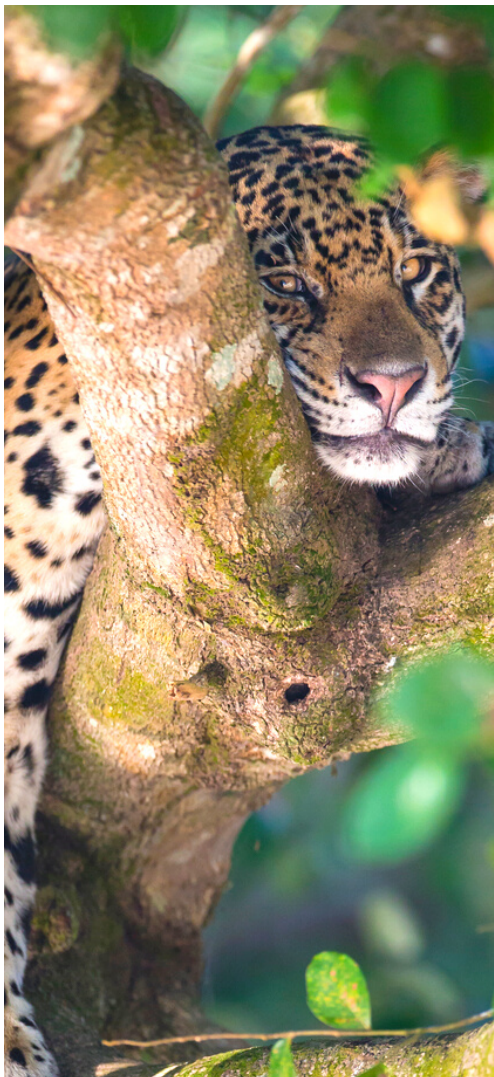
Number of countries from Mexico to Argentina where jaguars currently live in.

2

Number of countries where it is extinct (Uruguay and El Salvador).

-50%

Jaguars currently live in 50% of their historical territory.



The jaguar (*Panthera onca*) is the largest feline of the American continent and a valuable symbol for many indigenous cultures. As a top predator, jaguars are key elements of ecosystems helping to maintain biodiversity and ecological processes. Despite its protected status and hidden from the eyes of the world, a price has been put on their heads and their future is very dark.

At between \$7 billion and \$23 billion each year, the Illegal Wildlife Trade (IWT) is the fourth most lucrative global crime after drug, human and arms trafficking. Several investigations have shown that there is a convergence between IWT and other crimes such as drug trafficking. Currently, most of the attention and funding to prevent wildlife trafficking goes to Africa and Asia, while **Latin America** remains a blind spot where jaguars are increasingly being poached and illegally traded. But, **what drives this crime? What contextual factors make it possible?**

## Chain of threats

Infrastructure development changes land use

opening the door of forests that were previously isolated areas.

This causes the loss and fragmentation of the jaguar's habitat,

which has less and less access to previously available wild prey.

All this pushes jaguars to hunt livestock or domestic animals

leading to an increase in community-jaguar conflicts.

In parallel, the increase of Asian migration to South American countries

grows a new market that, together with all of the above, increases poaching

while authorities face a lack of information and tools to prosecute the crime.

## Loss and fragmentation of jaguars' habitat

The South American continent is developing rapidly. In the next ten years, \$250 billions will enter the continent from (Asian) investors for infrastructure building, extractive projects, mining and dams. This development causes changes in land use, causing the loss and/or fragmentation of jaguars' habitat and a reduction in prey species.

The new infrastructure also opens up natural areas that were previously isolated from the civilized world, exposing jaguar habitat to poaching and increasing unintentional conflicts between local farmers/residents and jaguars as many rural communities and cattle ranches are located nearby wild areas. Their first impulse is often to take up arms for fear that the jaguars will kill their cattle or their dogs. However, in many of these areas, people have lived with jaguars over generations, but the knowledge of "how" to coexist without conflict is being lost generation after generation.

## Increased lucrative market

Until 10–15 years ago, a dead jaguar had little or no economic value. However, this changed with the arrival of thousands of Asian migrant workers in South America. Almost 90,000 workers from China arrived in 2012 alone.

Since ancient times, Asian peoples have believed that products derived from certain animal species have medicinal value. For example, tiger bones have always been a favorite to cure all sorts of illnesses, from malaria to arthritis. However, tigers are in danger of extinction and the situation is so serious that it is almost impossible to obtain products from this animal. The Asian black market has focused on an alternative: lion bones are used but also body parts of the jaguar. The fangs of this animal, which is commonly called "American Tiger" in Asian countries, are difficult to differentiate from those of a tiger; although it is also traded for its meat, bones, skin, penis or testicles.

Now, as a result of booming infrastructure projects, larger Asian communities are appearing in South America and the trade in jaguar teeth, paws and skulls is rising too. Traders use existing criminal networks and the same smuggling routes they use to trade drugs, gold, and timber.



## Lack of information and tools

South American authorities are not prepared to deal with this form of crime in their backyard. First of all, it is a relatively new problem. There is limited information on the extent of illegal trade, smuggling routes and the most important hotspots where jaguars are poached. The information available is not adequately shared, neither in the country nor in the region. And secondly, the lack of data is due in part to a conspicuous lack of oversight and a general lack of knowledge within the justice system about how to deal with wildlife crime. On the few occasions an arrest is made, it rarely leads to a conviction.

## IUCN NL's researchers discovered:

- 1. The scope of trade is increasing.**  
Seizure figures have shown an increase since 2012, reaching the highest point in February 2018 when a stash of 185 jaguar teeth was seized in Bolivia. Jaguar parts are openly sold on Facebook, in stores, on the Internet or by roads.
- 2. The demand for jaguar products is growing.**  
As could be verified in the field investigation carried out by the undercover team that interviewed local merchants in China. The fact that in Bolivia there are radio ads offering to buy jaguar teeth is another indication that demand is growing.
- 3. Jaguar teeth are sold in Asian countries as tiger teeth.**  
While in Bolivia the main interest is in teeth, in Suriname whole carcasses are processed into a medicinal paste that is consumed locally and smuggled into Asian countries.
- 4. Trade is professionalised and converges with other illegal activities.**  
In our investigation, the same names continue to appear as in the investigations of drug trafficking, money laundering and human trafficking. This indicates that organised gangs are playing a key role.

# Operation Jaguar

## Investigation and fight against wildlife crime



Since 2018, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, National Committee of The Netherlands (IUCN NL) has been working against IWT in the Horn of Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and in several Latin American countries. With the support of the Dutch Postcode Lottery, **Operation Jaguar** started in **April 2019**. The project focuses on **Bolivia, Suriname, Guyana, Peru, and Venezuela** and it is structured around four key areas of work:

1. **Identifying networks.** We can only do something about the illegal trade and poaching if we know where and when it takes place and who is involved. Together with our partner Earth League International (famous from the Netflix documentary "The Ivory Game"), we expose smuggling routes and reveal networks and key figures in wildlife crime mafia. Following a request by CITES, decision 18.251, paragraph A.
2. **Training local communities.** Local communities can play an important role in the fight against poaching. We train them to recognise and report (early signs of) poaching in their areas. We share the information provided with major players across the borders, such as Interpol.
3. **Making crime prevention more professional.** To tackle crime we must invest in reinforcing the South American investigative system: from the forest ranger who comes across traces of poaching, to the customs officer who confiscates a batch of teeth and the judge who sentences the criminal. Together with our partner IFAW, we train forest rangers and local residents to collect and document evidence. We also support the judicial authorities such as the Public Prosecution Service in formulating the indictment and building a strong case, so that the chance of a conviction is as high as possible.
4. **Mobilising the public and politicians.** We raise the priority given to IWT by governments and the general public. Documentaries are a tried and tested means for opening the eyes of the public and politicians to the tragedy unfolding right in front of them. In 2021, we released the documentary "Tigre Gente" directed by Elizabeth Unger at the [Tribeca Film Festival](#). And, we are producing a podcast in Spanish together with a multidisciplinary community from different countries.

# Key results (I)

The **results** have been very positive and impactful. On the one hand, we have seen great enthusiasm amongst law enforcement officials in Guyana and Suriname who have been trained to increase their efficiency in IWT detection. On the other hand, investigations into the trade in Suriname and Bolivia show a massive trade network spanning several countries with strong links to the illegal trade in timber, gold, and narcotics, as well as other illegal activities such as money laundering or human trafficking. The overwhelming scale of these networks is driven by the high demand and profits for jaguar fangs. Showing this to governments is key.

IWT networks were mapped and 75 Persons Of Interest (POI) and 3 criminal groups were identified. It was also identified that Bolivian networks have extensions in Ecuador and Peru.

In June 2021, Confidential Intelligence Briefs (CIB) containing actionable data were provided to the Bolivian government. **This has led to the arrest of five high-profile traffickers in Bolivia.**

IUCN NL's local partner, Savia, received support to train park rangers and raise awareness amongst communities that co-exist with jaguars in Bolivia.

The Jaguar Alliance Network was established, involving 9 organizations in Bolivia. It facilitates communication, coordination and exchange of information on jaguar conservation and trafficking.

Youth groups from local communities where there is more conflict with jaguars act as multiplier agents and raise awareness about coexistence with this feline.

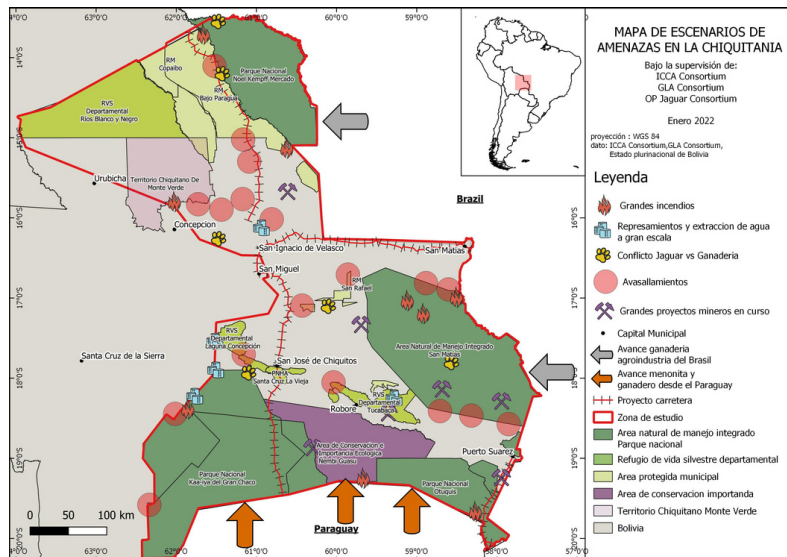
A Species Action Plan was created in Suriname.

The "Expert Group of Power of the Jaguar" was created. It brings together scientists from different disciplines to work on the coexistence of the jaguar and species protection systems.

Creation of the first map in Bolivia that shows the areas where there are coexistence conflicts with the jaguar.

Law enforcement officers and the judiciary were trained in Bolivia, Suriname and Guyana

Media attention generated for jaguar trafficking



Serios de Mongabay: jaguares en la mina, jaguares en la mina

## Tráfico de jaguares en Bolivia: ¿Dónde están los colmillos?

por Gustavo Jiménez en 14 febrero 2021



## Gangs in Latin America use bribery, secret routes to smuggle jaguar parts to China: report

By Oliver Griffin

3 MIN READ



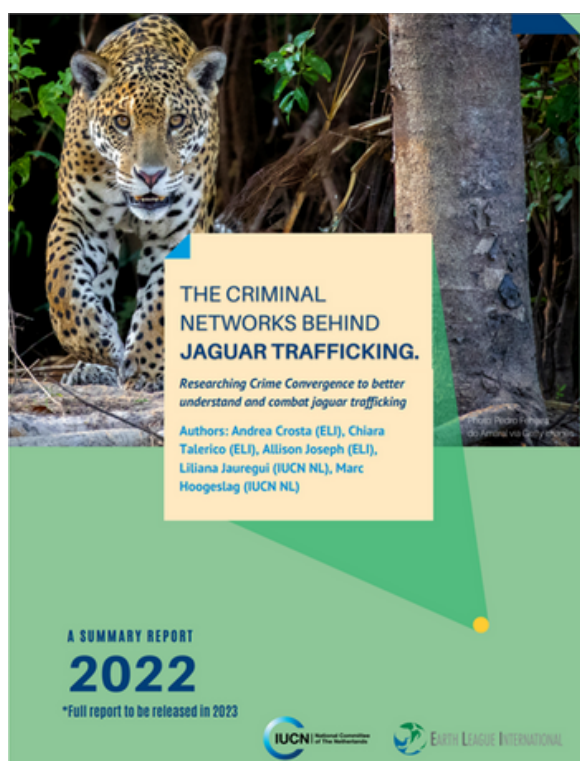
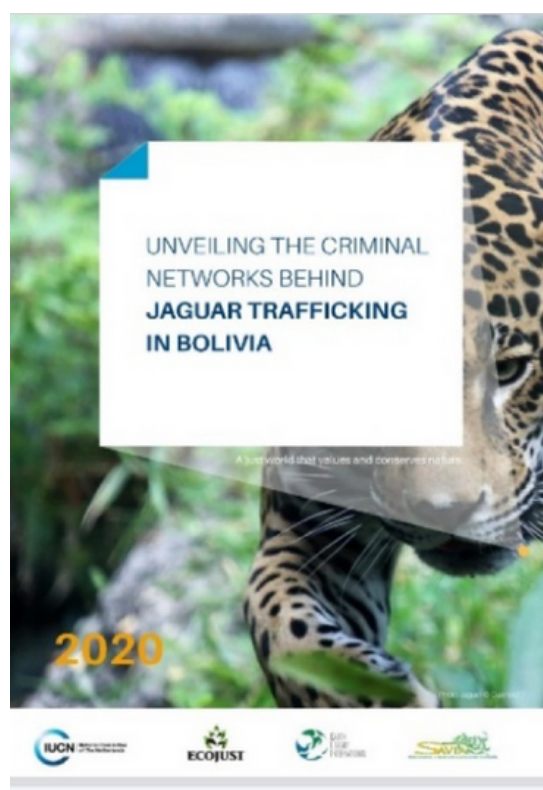
BOGOTA (Reuters) - Criminal organizations in Bolivia and other Latin American countries are bribing police and circumventing customs restrictions to smuggle parts of jaguars to mainland China, an investigation by environmental groups showed on Thursday.

# Key results (II)

In the context of Operation Jaguar two reports were published:

In 2020 we published a report that unveiled the traffickers' modus operandi and transport methods, routes and geographical hotspots. The traffickers identified have solid transnational networks that allow them to smuggle without major issues jaguar parts as well as every sort of illegal goods from South America to China. The goods are generally transported by plane, with individuals carrying them into pieces of luggage or on their bodies.

In 2022, we published a report on jaguar trafficking and the convergence with other crimes. This summary report provides an overview of the key findings regarding jaguar trafficking in the countries of Bolivia, Suriname, Peru, and Ecuador, followed by a case study of a top transnational jaguar trafficking network(s) identified through investigative fieldwork. From here, we share detailed evidence and first-hand information regarding jaguar trafficking and its convergence, or overlap, with other serious crimes, such as drug smuggling, human trafficking, gold trafficking, or money laundering. Finally, conclusions and recommendations are provided regarding actions and steps needed to continue addressing the illegal jaguar trade in Latin America.



The reports was shared with relevant stakeholders like the Government of Bolivia, INTERPOL, UNODC, the Chair of the IUCN Species Survival Commission, and the CITES Secretariat. These organisations were unaware of the magnitude of the traffic in jaguar parts. As a consequence, CITES invited Operation Jaguar's team to present the report to representatives of all jaguar range states. The attendees, who work in countries such as Mexico and Brazil, were very impressed and expressed the desire to extend Operation Jaguar to their countries. It also received significant media coverage around the world.



# Next steps

## Post-Operation Jaguar strategies

Jaguars in South America are increasingly being hunted for their fangs, bones and other body parts. With **Operation Jaguar**, we wanted to combat this crime against wildlife so that this feline can continue to fulfill its important role in the ecosystem. And we did it by unmasking criminal networks, raising awareness amongst local population, and professionalising investigation and prosecution by authorities. To continue with this work, we have identified a series of urgent needs that have allowed us to develop several action strategies, two of them detailed below.

### Needs identified post Operation Jaguar

**Generate information for the general public** focusing on understanding trafficking networks and areas of conflicts between communities and jaguars based on already available information and new investigations.

**Rewilding local knowledge in jaguar landscapes** including communities in a holistic way and respecting their role as local actors and their perspective of the species. We want to incorporate social sciences in the construction of species plans that until now only consider ecological and biological information without taking into account ancestral knowledge and local perspectives.

**Expand the work to more jaguar range states** for example Ecuador, because it has been discovered that it has a key role in wildlife trafficking, and French Guiana because it is the port of entry to the European Union.

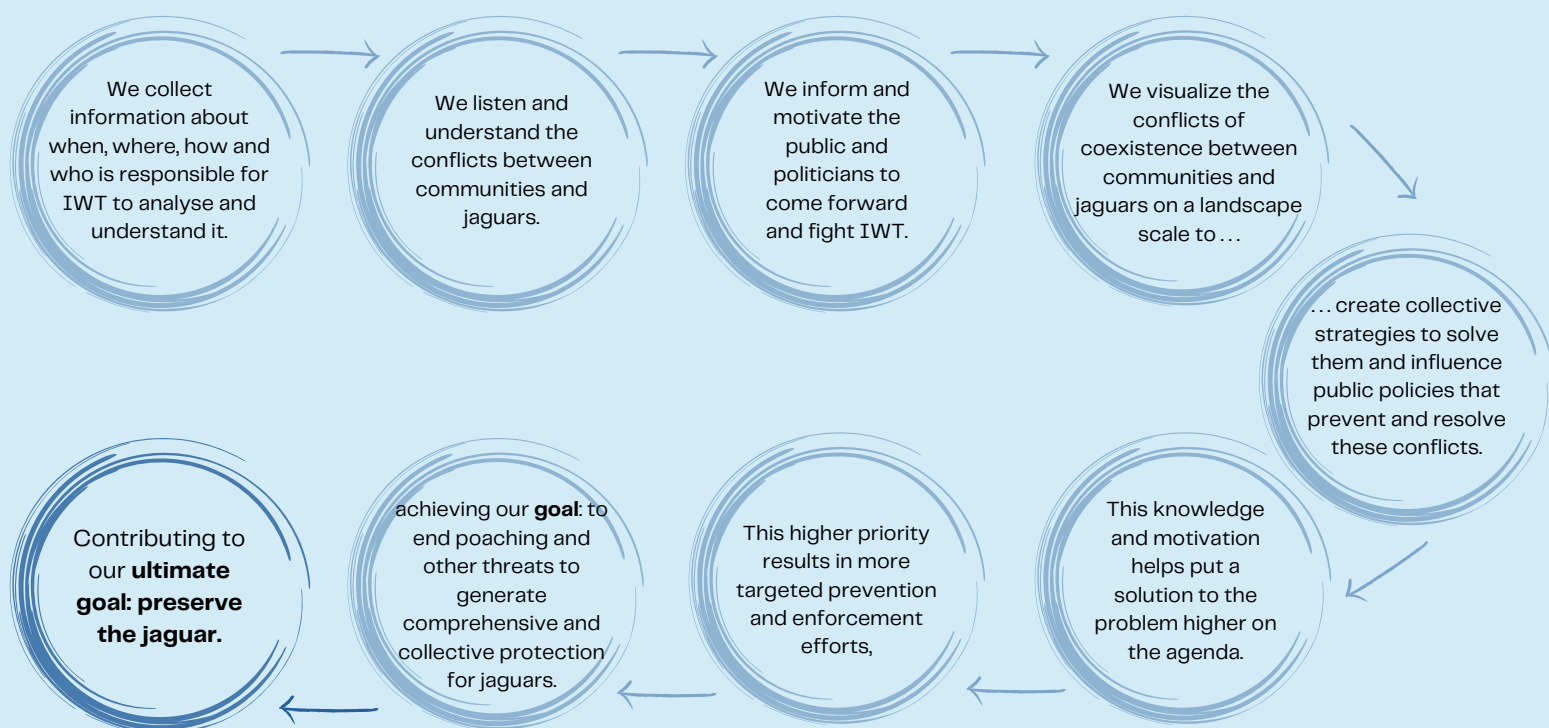
### Proposed interventions

1. **Unveiling trafficking networks.** Collect and disclose crucial information to work in an effective and targeted manner, because we need to know where, when and how to combat illegal trade.
2. **IPLCs as protagonists of protection of jaguars and their habitat**
3. **Professionalise capacity to combat wildlife trafficking in key enforcement and judicial agencies** We train stakeholders in law enforcement and the justice system so wildlife crime can be better tracked and criminals brought to justice and prosecuted.
4. **Elevating the priority given to wildlife trafficking by government and the public** to raise awareness of the problem and awaken the will to act at local, regional and international levels.
5. **Rewilding traditional knowledge in jaguar landscapes** about biodiversity, relevant ecosystem trends, and the cultural importance of the jaguar. The knowledge that is present in these communities is being lost and often overlooked, but it is key to protect jaguars.
6. **Biodiversity friendly local economies in jaguar habitat** and technical measures to prevent conflicts with jaguars.

# 1.Unveiling trafficking networks

After the initial work carried out as part of Operation Jaguar in revealing jaguar trafficking networks in South America, this follow-up strategy aims to obtain more information extending the investigation to two more countries, and to make information available to the general public. Because knowing where, when and how to fight illegal trade is crucial to work effectively and in a targeted manner.

Objectives	Activities	Products
Reveal, understand and comprehend jaguar trafficking networks in and outside jaguar range states.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mapping / Geospatial analysis</li> <li>• Covert operations</li> <li>• Office research</li> <li>• Field interviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidential Intelligence Briefs (CIB) distributed among political and legal, local and traditional authorities.</li> <li>• Public Reports (webdoc)</li> </ul>
Make the situation known to the non-specialised general public.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dissemination of reports</li> <li>• Communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Webtool: built from IUCN NL experience with <u>"Las Rutas del Oro"</u>.</li> <li>• Geo-spatial maps</li> <li>• <u>Wildlex</u>: Easy and free information service on laws (legislation and jurisprudence) related to wildlife and using new technologies.</li> <li>• Observatory of conflicts between wildlife and communities or economic sectors such as infrastructure, agricultural frontier. Information repository including the local perspective for a more collective protection. Includes maps. Built from IUCN NL experience in the Amazon with <u>Amazon Rights in Focus</u>.</li> </ul>





## 2. IPLCS as protagonist of protection of jaguars and their habitat

The main sourcing areas of jaguar products for the (inter)national markets are landscapes where the jaguar coexists with rural communities living near the protected areas.

Interactions between jaguars and people are increasing, pushed by development-driven land use change that is causing habitat loss and – fragmentation as well as a reduction of jaguar prey species. In livestock raising communities and (illegal) mining areas, livestock loss by jaguars and the loss of domestic animals are common. In encounters between jaguars and people, the jaguar always pulls the shortest straw, leading to retaliatory – or preventive killings.

As important actors in jaguar landscapes, a close involvement of IPLCs in the conservation of jaguars will reduce the loss of livestock and domestic animals and as a result the retaliation killings.

Objectives	Activities	Products
Ensuring coexistence in jaguar landscapes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Stakeholder interviews</li><li>• Participatory mapping of the landscape where IPLCs and jaguars coexist, identifying (potential) conflict zones (incl. food security risks)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Outreach products in local language</li><li>• Report on attitude of project communities towards jaguars</li><li>• (Digital) land use maps with identified (potential) conflict zones</li></ul>
Give IPLCS a leading role in protection of jaguars and its habitat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Restoring traditional governance</li><li>• Awareness raising on the ecological role of the jaguar and the increasing threats to its existence</li><li>• Implement technical conflict prevention measures</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Adjusted land use- and livestock management plans that lead to reduced number of conflicts</li><li>• Technical interventions in place to reduce conflicts</li><li>• Practical guidelines on involvement of IPLCs in protection of jaguar landscapes</li></ul>

### 3. Professionalise capacity to combat wildlife trafficking in key enforcement and judicial agencies

In Latin America, investigative capacity is lacking and wildlife laws are rarely enforced. Investigations of traffickers are rare, and prosecutions almost nonexistent. In order to tackle crime, we must invest in strengthening the South American law enforcement apparatus. and the legal frameworks and – tools needed.

Objectives	Activities	Products
Stronger law enforcement apparatus in jaguar range states	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gap analysis and needs assessments</li><li>• Deploy wildlife detection dog teams, to support local law enforcement in the detection of illegal wildlife products</li><li>• knowledge exchange with peers in other continents</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tailor made training programs for law enforment officials and the judiciary (fed by and in alignment with intervention 1)</li></ul>
Enhance cooperation and information sharing among inter institutional departments and jaguar range states	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Facilitating peer-to-peer exchanges at national and transboundary level</li><li>• Facilitate knowledge sharing at the global level</li></ul>	





## 4. Elevating the priority given to wildlife trafficking by government and the public

If people think about poaching and trafficking of wildlife (products) they often think of Africa and Asia, elephants, rhino, tiger and pangolins. As a consequence, most of the attention and funds towards preventing Illegal Wildlife Trade (IWT) is directed towards Africa and Asia, whilst IWT in Latin America remains somewhat of a blind spot. Consequently, law enforcement agencies and prosecutors in Latin America do not get the same attention and capacity building opportunities as their colleagues in Africa and Asia. If we want to make changes, relevant parties need to be aware of the seriousness of the issues at stake and to the tragedy that takes place under their noses.

On a local level, more awareness is needed about the important role the jaguar plays as a top predator in ecosystems and in many cultures of the people coexisting with jaguars.

Objectives	Activities	Products
To elevate the priority given to tackling wildlife trafficking by governments, the public, corporate stakeholders and donors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Produce reports for governments and media articles for the general public about the scale, nature and dynamics of jaguar trafficking and the convergence with other crimes.</li><li>• Organize meetings with Chinese stakeholders to inform them about IWT and the impact on wildlife.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Public reports and media articles about the scale, nature and dynamics of jaguar trafficking and the convergence with other crimes</li><li>• Outreach products directed towards Chinese stakeholders</li></ul>
To increase awareness about the ecological and cultural role of the jaguar and the threats it is facing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Produce media articles about the cultural value of jaguars</li><li>• Make tailor – made awareness raising products about the role and fate of the jaguar for the different target audiences</li><li>• Organize events on International Jaguar Day</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Media products about the cultural value of jaguars</li><li>• Outreach products about role and fate of jaguars for local communities and stakeholders in and around jaguar habitat.</li><li>• Media outreach about International Jaguar Day</li></ul>

## 5. Rewilding traditional knowledge in jaguar landscapes

Indigenous peoples and local communities have deep-seated knowledge about nature. Although half of the world's biodiversity is found in indigenous territories, this knowledge is often overlooked and underestimated in major conservation strategies. This strategy aims to revitalize and restore knowledge of and with indigenous and local communities, specifically focusing on landscapes with frequent human-jaguar interactions. Thus, we restore, document and disseminate traditional knowledge for future generations and for the conservation community, with the involvement of several generations and communities. In this process, the role of the elderly and youth groups is key. Documented knowledge will be spread across generations and, through our IUCN network, incorporated into scientific and research platforms.

The current pilot project focuses on two landscapes: Bolivia and Suriname. And with different communities (indigenous, local communities and Afro-descendants) in areas with coexistence problems between humans and jaguars.

Objectives	Activities	Products
Document communities' knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Documentation.</li><li>• Participatory 3D mapping.</li><li>• Leader-Youth Meetings</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 3D map of the areas of greatest conflict between people and jaguars, focusing on this relationship and land use. Built from IUCN NL's experience with the <u>Saamaka communities in Suriname</u>.</li></ul>
Spread knowledge among key audiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Dialogues between leaders, artists, biologists and anthropologists to share visions</li><li>• Theatre performances to spread knowledge in front of intergenerational groups</li><li>• Participation in global scientific forums: Latin American Congress of Protected Areas (2023), Species Survival Commission, Culture, Spirituality and Conservation (CSC), CEESP of IUCN.</li><li>• Inclusion of the information obtained in the Observatory (Proposed Strategy 1).</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Media products</li><li>• Audiobooks</li><li>• Theatre productions</li><li>• Observatory (see Proposed Strategy 1).</li></ul>

While the term 'rewilding' is mainly used for the physical world, planting trees and reintroducing species, this will not be successful unless the link between humans and nature is restored. That is why we use the term 'rewilding knowledge' to invest in these ancestral ties.



## 6. Biodiversity friendly local economies in jaguar habitat

To achieve more peaceful coexistence we have to reduce conflicts and take away the triggers for jaguar killings. Managing this problem requires a combination of effectively addressing the concerns of cattle ranchers and in the meantime improve the perception of jaguars. Investing in cattle ranching systems with less conflicts and providing resilient economic alternatives that depend on healthy jaguar populations is therefor key to reduce killings.

Objectives	Activities	Products
Reduction of number of conflicts and killings of jaguars	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Improve cattle management strategies to reduce the risk of conflicts.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Increased number of landowners / cattle owners involved in resilient livelihood options</li></ul>
Provide local economies that are beenficial to local communities and jaguars	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Development of wildlife – friendly ecotourism packages which can be promoted by communities coexisting with healthy jaguar populations.</li><li>• Provide technical support to landowners to participate in conservation as citizen scientists</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Strengthened systems in place to prevent jaguar–livestock conflict</li><li>• Landowners actively involved in monitoring of jaguar and human – wildlife conflicts</li></ul>



Hidden from the eyes of the world, the jaguar has a price on its head and is facing a bleak future. Our work on Operation Jaguar has already proven that with focused interventions, great steps can be made towards tackling the trade.

We want to continue our work by unveiling trafficking networks, collecting and disclosing information, strengthening law enforcement capacity and raising awareness for the problem among key stakeholders.

We hope that you will embark with us on this initiative. An urgent journey to save the jaguar from the fate of the tiger in Asia.





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Thank you for all your support and efforts  
in the protection of the last king of the jungle