LAST MAN STANDING

By Harv Ebers and Ron Thompson

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I married my lovely Judy in Mexico. Why do these Gringos in this border bar call themselves hunters if they are so darned concerned about crossing a four-strand barbed-wire fence for a deer hunting adventure? Well, maybe the fence is a wall now in places, but it is still a lot easier to hunt Mexico today than to hunt the wilds of Alaska for caribou with a stick bow in the '50s. In those days, the Alaskan wilderness adjacent to the small Eskimo village of Glennallen, some 183 miles east of Anchorage, was far more intimidating than any cartel in Mexico. Since Glenn St. Charles passed, I'm basically the last surviving founding member of the Pope and Young Club. I could sure tell these youngsters what hunting was really like. Wild places, primitive equipment, and just you, your guts and the environment are what hunting is about. Good hunting adventures are hard to find these days.

The Sierra Madre Occidental is an unforgiving mother of a mountain range that initially rises out of the northern Mexican state of Sonora. As an extension of the Continental Divide and Rocky Mountains, it runs north-south from the U. S. border near Douglas, Arizona and ends in the Mexican state of Guanajuato. Because of its latitudinal length and precipitous points reaching over 3,300 meters, it has a variety of vegetative communities and a diversity of endemic wildlife that befuddles a North American biologist's mind. There is a unique birthing in the Sierra Madre in Sonora, an outcome of the Sierra Madrean oak woodland's sympatric relationship where it interfaces with the Sinoloan thornscrub. The result is a convergence of very different ecosystems that helps rank Mexico as third in the world for biodiversity[1].

Hunters have protected the jaguar on 12 ranches by buying deer permits, killing a few deer on a sustainable basis and then leaving. In exchange, the ranchers agree not to kill jaguars. The ranchers have bought trail cameras with their income from hunting and can now show they have at least 12 different jaguars roaming around, up from six just a few years ago.

An unusual combination, saving the predators that eat the game we care about - bowhunters putting up the funds to save the last remaining breeding population of jaguar in North America while getting the opportunity to hunt Coues' whitetail of the Sonora Desert. In northern Mexico, the three main threats to jaguars have been described as illegal predator control as the result of livestock depredation, illegal hunting and depletion of prey.

These guys look adventuresome enough. Some have hunted dangerous wildlife all over the world, but I doubt half of them can even sit a horse like this old Missouri livestock hauler, let alone kill one of the smallest and smartest deer species in North America. I have been told there are jaguars, neo-tropical river otters, and boa constrictors where we are going, and the proceeds from this bar full of storytellers are going to help fund conservation efforts for the jaguar. We should just donate the money we are spending on booze tonight and we could save all the jaguars in Mexico. Haven't hunters always paid for wildlife conservation? The only reason we still have wolves, grizzly bears, and mountain lions in the U.S. is because hunters have historically supported the conservation of their prey. The Boone and Crockett Club and Pope and Young Club support the conservation of all species.

In northern Mexico, the three main threats to jaguars have been described as illegal predator control as the result of livestock depredation, illegal hunting and depletion of prey[2, 3, 4, 5]. The northernmost known breeding population of jaguars in North America is in northeastern Sonora, Mexico[2,4]. They are listed as endangered in the United States and threatened in Mexico. Now that you, the reader, can visualize the place and are informed about the target species of this article, ask yourself this question: "Why do I sleep with my head against the wall?"

The book They Never Surrendered *sure grabbed my attention about the country where we will be hunting. I did not know that, even after my birth date, the Apache people were still trying to survive in this remote and beautiful landscape with wolves, jaguars and grizzly bears. Now a bunch of us bowhunters, mostly members of the Pope and Young Club and some members of the Boone and Crockett Club, are about to enter into it and hunt it with the same primitive archery equipment. If President Calvin Coolidge had not put a stop to Americans participating in the "hunt for the last remaining Apache" there would have been another dark mark on us as just another intolerant race of people.*

We sleep with our heads against the wall possibly because of an evolutionarily primeval fear of large carnivores dragging us out of a cave by our heads. Are lights going on? When dragged by our feet, we at least have a chance to grab a weapon as we go out

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the entrance. So why do hunters as a fraternity and sorority, and fast-declining subpopulation akin to the last Apache in the Sierra, still have such a divergence of opinions about large carnivores? This divergence rarely mentions the ecological value of carnivores to us humans and to the ecosystems within which they have evolved to maintain—ecosystems we too have evolved from within. In a recent article in *Science*, titled the "Trophic Downgrading of Planet Earth"[6], there is a quote that hunters and non-hunters alike should sit up and take notice of:

> "What escapes the eye….
> is a much more insidious kind of
> extinction: the extinction of
> interactions."—Daniel H. Janzen

The Rio Aros is sure a beautiful river—reminds me of some of the Alaskan streams I have crossed, uh, naked. I can even find river otter and jaguar tracks here on the banks. Not even a contrail overhead from a jet since we have been here. Hard to imagine this is the last free-flowing river in all of Sonora. Heard the Canadians are trying to dam this river above here so they can develop a copper mine. The price of copper will be the destructive force for ruination of this beautiful river and all the wildlife that depends on it. I believe Aldo Leopold hunted just up river from here—and with a stick bow no less—called it the Rio Gavalon. He was my kind of hunter. Then the famous jaguar-hunting brothers, Clel and Dell Lee, brought their hounds and clients into this exact spot to hunt jaguars. They had to pack in here by horses and mules in the late 1930s, at night no less, in July, as it was too hot for their hounds to travel during the day. Why would anyone come down here in the summer? Only hunters would consider such an arduous trip for such a valued trophy.

It has been proven that the loss of large apex (top of the food chain) carnivores, like the jaguar, result in causative ecological cascades within highly evolved, yet intricately connected, ecosystems as predator-prey relationships are altered or entirely eliminated by human activities[7,8,9]. The authors of the *Science* magazine article present a thorough and science-based case that we are again in the early to middle stages of another extinction—the "sixth great extinction." In other words, soon it may no longer matter where we place our heads at night. So why can't hunters, as top predators if we need to anthropomorphize, fully appreciate the true role top carnivores play in the environment? Our natural value system has shifted from one closely associated with the living world around us to a world supported by technology and measured by monetary gains in the stock market. If an organism has no value to us monetarily, than we tend to relegate it to the role of a destructive force, in competition with us for food or any related outdoor-based business, such as guiding. Trophic cascades have yet to affect a major population and essentially have no real value to our day-to-day lives and are thus viewed as processes that we feel we can accomplish better with a bow or rifle.

Looking across the Rio Aros I see the same vegetation and land forms. Yet, the property is owned by an environmental group, funded in part by U.S. non-profits supported by our sportsmen's dollars. They bought a few ranches down here and are declaring they are protecting jaguars with a proclamation that the area is now a "jaguar preserve." Those three ranches would never entirely support one jaguar in this country. Heck, they removed the livestock and then the neighboring rancher immediately

ABOVE: Dab Willems with his Coues' deer, one of the successes of the trip. **TOP RIGHT:** These bow hunters proved to be better hunters than expected: 16 for 25 is good hunt success for even a firearms hunt. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** Harv (right) with Dale Hall and his buck.

experienced jaguar livestock predation problems. We met him at a jaguar meeting in town. I wonder how he handled that situation just on the other side of a four-strand barbed-wire fence? Ranchers are resilient in this country. I see the strychnine bottles hanging in the trees at the ranches. Ranchers do not want to go to sleep each night worrying that their profit margins will be eaten by a predator. I was told at a rancher's meeting that the preservationists are planning to buy more ranches and the folks in the communities are worried about what will support their local economies when all the cows are gone. As hunters, we have protected the jaguar here on 12 ranches by just buying deer permits, killing a few deer on a sustainable basis and then leaving. In exchange, the ranchers agree not to kill jaguars. The ranchers have bought trail cameras with their income from hunting and can now show they have at least 12 different jaguars roaming around, up from six just a few years ago. I think this is an adaptation of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation. If only the Mexican states, instead of the Mexican federal government, managed their wildlife; maybe they should change their constitution.

In an essay "Beyond Wolf Advocacy, Toward Realistic Policies for Carnivore Conservation" Valerius Geist, Ph.D., states: "Predator conservation requires a well thought-out Continental Carnivore Conservation Strategy negotiated between Canada and the United States within the context of a Terrestrial Wildlife Conservation Treaty. While the primary purpose of such a treaty would be to enshrine the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation in treaty law, another objective would be to negotiate a continental Endangered Species agreement…."[10]. Once again, Mexico has been left out of the real definition of North America wildlife management and conservation—and funding consideration for conservation initiatives. If the past policy of large carnivore and prairie dog extirpation by the U. S. government had not been fully implemented by government agents working in Mexico, the grizzly bear, Mexican wolf and black-footed ferret would not be three of just five mammal species now extirpated in "North America" south of the U.S. international border. Should we not take a more active role to assist in returning the very species we funded to be poisoned, shot, and trapped towards extinction?

I think if the jaguars were given some monetary value, Mexico residents would be hand-feeding them down here to protect them. Of course that means managing them on a sustainable basis within the limits of their food resources, which would include cows. The study I read indicated they kill a lot of livestock, especially during the dry season. They do not yet know the real impact of jaguars on the native prey or livestock because there is a great resistance to studying them by the preserve builders. Biologists have radio-collared jaguars all over South America and southern Mexico. Maybe some of these folks do not want to really know the truth about the impacts of jaguars to the ranchers. That information could actually help conserve and protect the jaguar from the illegal indirect killing when the ranchers have to remove the occasional livestock-killing leon.

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India is an example of a failed, yet well-planned preserve system that was designed strictly for a large carnivore—the tiger—to survive into the future. Entire communities were moved to establish the system. Preserves are now believed to be too small in size to meet genetic introgression and lack connecting corridors that allow for long-ranging genetically important dispersing immigrants to travel between preserves. When people need natural resources just to survive, they will invade a protected area as quickly as an unprotected area. In India, armed guards are employed to keep recolonizing humans out of the preserves, but special societal bands of camouflaged homesteaders now hold major ground, and game rangers are afraid to rout out the invaders. Corruption cases, investigated by forensic geneticists, have demonstrated that an entire preserve's tiger population was killed and sold into the medicinal black market. In Raymond Bonner's classic book, *At the Hand of Man*, he makes a valid point that protected area establishment for endangered species will not assure the survival of a large carnivore species. Bonner uses the cheetah, another apex carnivore, in Africa in place of the tiger to make his point that if all wildlife species in an ecosystem are to thrive, the top carnivores must have an economic value. Bonner suggests that it be in the form of regulated hunting. Where the cheetah has been protected, it was subsequently killed indiscriminately by farmers, just as jaguars are today throughout their range from the northern most breeding population in Sonora, Mexico, south throughout South America, where they are "protected" from sport hunting. Nowhere within the range of the jaguar can you lawfully hunt a jaguar with a valid CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) permit. CITES is an international agreement between governments. Its aim is to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival.

Well, it was a good hunt with good Mexican food cooked over hot mesquite fires and a little shot of bacanora in the evening with good friends in a wild and remote country. These bowhunters were better hunters than I thought they would be: 16 for 25 is good hunt success for even a firearms hunt. I can tell they are anxious to return to their country, their homes, and families. I remember I would be gone for a month without a word with my family while hunting in Alaska. Now hunters walk around with satellite phones and even check their emails while sitting in their blinds. Damn technology, it will be the ruination of us as humans. With Glenn St. Charles gone, I missed him at the 50th anniversary of the Pope and Young Club this year. Gone too are the Apache from these Sierras and the wolf and grizzly. As the last founding member of the Pope and Young Club, I truly thank God for my fellow hunters and friends—all family in my book. Thank God for country like the Sierra Madre—Mother Earth. This trip reminds me that hunters can, and should, do more for each other and for all species that are so important to our natural world. Hunters have always paid for wildlife conservation. Now, if we could just get the rest of society to do the same. You know, it is kind of nice being the Last Man Standing. ■

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References and Notes

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