Notes from the Field

WINTER 2021

PUTTING ANTI-POACHING INTO COMMUNITY HANDS

THE SECRET TO FINDING ANDEAN CATS

SIGNS OF LIFE FOR PANAMA'S SAWFISH

WCN
Wildlife Conservation Network

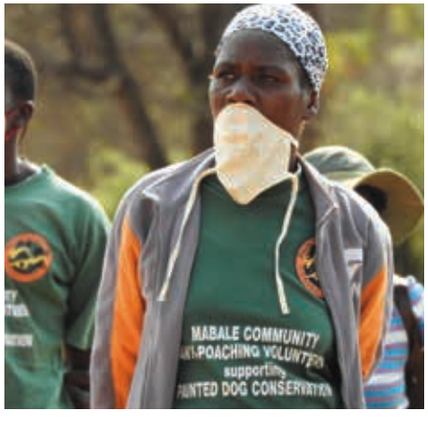
Bushmeat snares can easily kill painted dogs and other wildlife caught in them. The Mabale community even lost some of their livestock to these dangerous snares.

Peter Lindsey

Putting Anti-Poaching into Community Hands

The group moved steadily through the bush, their boots stamping the straw-colored dirt of Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park. Slung over their shoulders were dark coils of wire snares, used by bushmeat poachers to catch animals in a deadly grip. But these were no poachers—they were the Mabale Community Anti-Poaching Volunteer Group. Enlisted by Painted Dog Conservation (PDC), this group protects painted dogs and other wildlife by removing treacherous poaching snares, and as this year's operations came to a close, they were about to achieve a milestone.

Roughly 7,000 painted dogs are left in Africa, with 700 living in Zimbabwe and about 200 in Hwange National Park. Illegal bushmeat poaching is a constant threat in Hwange due to economic hardship on surrounding communities. Lockdowns and unemployment caused by COVID-19 added more pressure to these communities, thus increasing poaching. To protect the dogs, PDC deploys their Anti-Poaching Unit to patrol around Hwange daily. Since 2001, these scouts have removed over 30,000 wire snares from the park and helped curb poaching, but more patrols are always needed.



Mabale volunteers respect painted dogs and work closely with PDC to ensure their safety.

In 2015, a painted dog nicknamed "MK" was killed by a snare in the Mabale communal lands bordering Hwange. PDC brings economic, medical, and educational opportunities to this community, so the people there had a strong connection to painted dog conservation. Upset that a dog was killed on their land, the Mabale people decided to actively get involved in anti-poaching work. They organized into a group of 45 volunteers who began regularly patrolling the buffer zone between their land and Hwange. This year's patrols lasted six months—twice as long as last year's. They also added 40 new volunteers, and to further support PDC's efforts, they patrolled other poaching hot spots. In total, the Mabale group completed 637 patrols and removed 1,173 wire snares this year, a new benchmark for the group that translates into countless painted dogs saved.

Extra boots on the ground expanded PDC's reach and helped them achieve two goals simultaneously—protecting painted dogs and supporting local communities. The Mabale group received $30,000 from PDC this year in payment for their work. PDC also gave them PPE and camping gear to safely operate during the pandemic. While this compensation sends the message that aiding conservation pays, the Mabale volunteers were also motivated by their own respect for wildlife. Many of them first learned about painted dogs as children enrolled in PDC's free Iganyana Children's Bush Camp, where they visited the dogs at PDC's rehabilitation facility. This compelled them to save painted dogs as adults, a testament to the impact of PDC's programs on community attitude toward the species.

The volunteer group takes great pride in removing large amounts of bushmeat snares from the land bordering Hwange.

As Mabale volunteers removed another snare from the tangled foliage, they felt grateful for the family they had formed with each other and proud of the incredible work they have achieved. Poaching threats still remain in Hwange, so PDC is hopeful they can keep this group operating with additional funding. These volunteers demonstrate the importance of community involvement in conservation, saving painted dogs one snare at a time. ■

The Secret to Finding Andean Cats

The wind whipped through Cintia Tellaeche's hair as she crouched to reach the camera trap fastened to a post. She retrieved the SD card, hoping it contained evidence of Andean cats near Lagunillas del Farallón, a rural village in northwestern Argentina. That same wind reached Constanza Napolitano in neighboring Chile as she trekked toward another camera trap set up in the Parque Andino Juncal (PAJ) protected area with the same hope in her heart. These intrepid women are coordinators for the Andean Cat Alliance (AGA), and after months of crossed fingers, their hope would become reality.

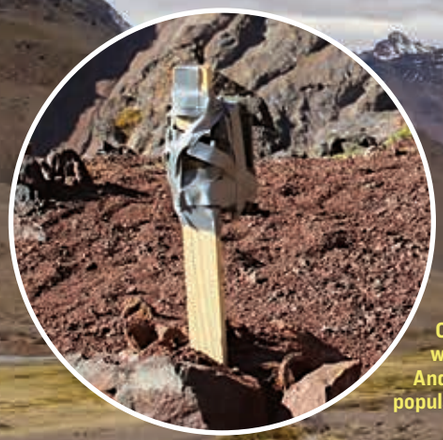
The Andean cat is one of the rarest small wild cats in the world, with less than 1,400 individuals still roaming the Andes Mountains. Small, scattered populations within vast habitats mean that some researchers spend entire careers never seeing one in person. Camera traps are a primary method of observing these cats, but an entire year can pass with only a handful of photos of this elusive species captured. This makes every new Andean cat photo very relevant. So, when Cintia's camera trap produced a photo of a cat staring right at her, it proved that Andean cats were living near Lagunillas del Farallón. Similarly, the camera trap that Constanza checked had produced the first photo of an Andean cat ever recorded in PAJ.

Two new sightings in two new locations in the same year is monumental for AGA, and was only possible by enlisting Andean communities in their conservation efforts. The Lagunillas del Farallón community is involved in AGA's CATCrafts program, which preserves cat habitat by providing local women artisans with sustainable economic opportunities. It was these villagers who first told Cintia they had seen Andean cats nearby, prompting her to install camera traps and involve the locals in citizen science, creating a deeper connection between them and wildlife. Constanza coordinates AGA's "In the Field 24/7" program in PAJ and relies on the deep local knowledge of PAJ's park rangers to identify the best spots to set up cameras.

With these new sightings, AGA can fill in knowledge gaps about Andean cat distribution. They are also more likely to find scat samples for genetic analysis, which helps AGA evaluate the impact of parasites and diseases spread from domestic animals to Andean cats. Gathering photos and samples are non-invasive ways to examine species health and create population estimates, which take years to complete. New sightings also help AGA develop a range map to advocate for protected land corridors. They believe it is very likely that more cats live in PAJ and Lagunillas del Farallón, with the latter having the most suitable habitat for them.

This is the first photo of an Andean cat ever recorded in Parque Andino Juncal.

Cintia and Constanza have had their hope of locating Andean cats reinvigorated by these latest findings. They credit these valuable milestones to support from local people, whose knowledge of landscapes is fundamental to AGA's strategies. By empowering locals to contribute to conservation and take pride in the wildlife around them, AGA is ensuring that everyone has an important role in finding and protecting Andean cats. ■



One of AGA's camera traps, which gather footage of Andean cats for research and population surveys.

Parque Andino Juncal (PAJ) is a private protected area with owners who are committed to preserving its pristine landscape and the wildlife within.

Park rangers' knowledge of PAJ was instrumental to discovering Andean cats in the area, and to cast a wider net, some rangers even installed their own camera traps in addition to AGA's.

Belén Zapararte

Signs of Life for Panama's Sawfish

In the estuarine waters of Panama's Darién Province, the pulse of the river lulled Hayro Cunampio's boat into a soothing rhythm. He leaned over the side in the comfortable grasp of the current, hauling up a net with his cohort of local fishers. But the hypnotic channel wasn't the only thing making this moment feel like a dream—they had captured a largetooth sawfish, one of the rarest rays found in these murky waters. As a Community Officer for MarAlliance, Hayro knew this encounter would create far-flung ripples for MarAlliance's research and advance their efforts to teach local fishers the value of protecting rare marine wildlife.

Hayro Cunampio regularly engages with Darién fisher communities to recruit them in MarAlliance's efforts to study sawfish in the region.

Sawfish were once regularly spotted along both of Panama's coasts, but for many years, sightings of this peculiar ray have occurred with the infrequency of comets. This particular sawfish was the only one of its species to be caught by a research team in Central America in over 20 years. Hayro and the fishers named the sawfish Aba, which means "one" in the Emberá language. At just over one meter long, Aba was still a juvenile; sawfish reach maturity at around three meters long, so assessing a young male like Aba offered MarAlliance the opportunity to study the species early in its lifecycle.

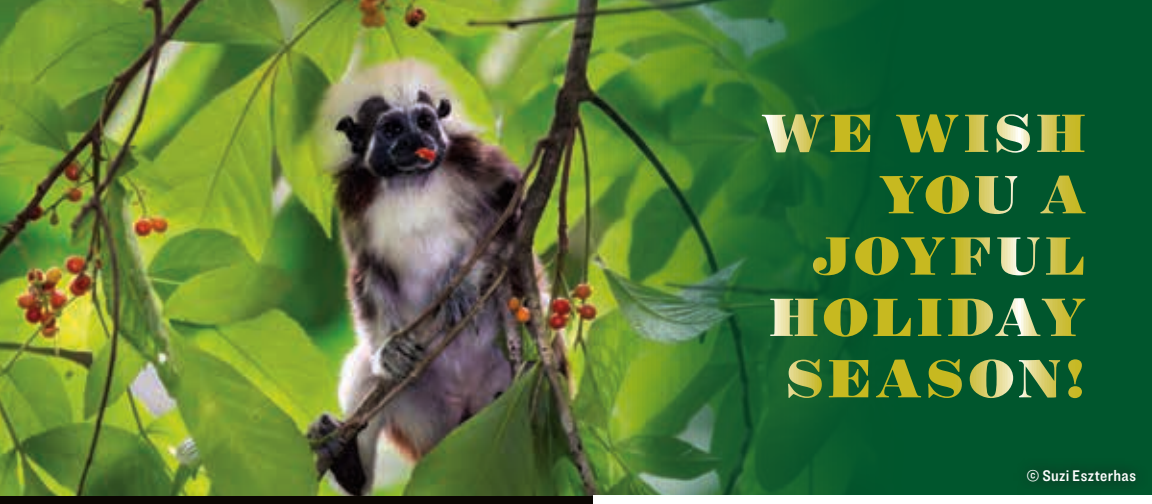
Despite his youth, Aba still possessed the sawfish's most captivating feature—a chainsaw-like protrusion, known as a rostrum, adorning his face. Yet this distinctive feature is also one of the main reasons that sawfish have declined—fishers have overwhelmingly depleted their populations, often accidentally and sometimes intentionally. Sawfish rostra are lined with teeth, which can easily get entangled in gillnets designed to indiscriminately ensnare large quantities of fish. These teeth are also used to create spurs for rooster fighting, making sawfish rostra a highly prized item. To halt these harmful activities, Hayro has spent countless hours getting to know fishers one-on-one in many Darién communities, educating them about endangered marine wildlife. He has developed a network of local fishers committed to protecting sawfish and trained to safely release them when caught.

Aba is the first largetooth sawfish handled by researchers in Central America in over two decades.

The dedication and expertise of these fishers has helped MarAlliance better understand sawfish ecology and where they can be found. When Aba was discovered, Hayro collected valuable measurements and tissue samples for genetic analysis while also showing the fishers how to do the same. Fishers throughout the region have shared stories with MarAlliance about six other sawfish found in the past year, helping Hayro's team map out critical sawfish habitat in Panama's mangroves and coastal areas. And thanks to Hayro's influence, these fishers, who may have previously killed the sawfish, are now releasing them and gathering crucial data to help conserve the species.

As he lowered Aba back into the river and watched the young ray disappear beneath the surface, Hayro knew that his team had now proven that Darién Province's rich biodiversity did not end at the shore. MarAlliance continues to build awareness for sawfish, promote their recovery, and train fishers with conservation techniques throughout one of the last homes of this unusual species. ■

Largetooth sawfish were once common in Panama, but years of unchecked fishing have caused their populations to dwindle.



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