
Macho B after his capture (Photo by Arizona Game and Fish Dept.)

Nearly a year ago, Arizona game officials captured, radio-collared, and released Macho B, an endangered jaguar. Shortly thereafter, he was recaptured, and euthanized. The events surrounding Macho B's capture and death remain under criminal investigation by federal authorities. This week, the Department of Interior's Inspector General weighed in, issuing this report of the separate investigation it conducted at the request of Representatives Raul Grijalva (D-AZ) and Nick Rahall (D-WV).

The IG report faults Arizona's Game and Fish Department for the capture, and ultimately the death, of Macho B. It does not directly address media reports that the snare that caught Macho B was deliberately baited with jaguar scat. But it does say that evidence developed in the criminal investigation "indicates that Macho B's first capture by AZGFD employees was intentional" and links "an AZGFD subcontractor and possibly an AZGFD employee to criminal wrongdoing." It also points out that a subcontractor working on the bear and mountain lion studies for which the snares were supposedly intended was simultaneously working on a project to photograph jaguars in the same area, and that "evidence suggests that the subcontractor and employees of AZGFD knew that Macho B was in the area of the mountain lion and black bear study."

FWS employees interviewed for the IG report said they did not believe that the general permit Arizona held under ESA section 10 for game management activities authorized the jaguar capture. That opinion won't be conclusive in any criminal proceedings, of course, but it is certainly plausible. The permit did not explicitly mention jaguars, and was general to the entire state wildlife management program. AZGFD did not seek a permit specifically for the mountain lion and bear study, nor did it follow the protocol set out for jaguar capture in a conservation framework jointly agreed upon by Arizona and New Mexico.

The IG reports that it found "no evidence to suggest criminal involvement" by federal employees. But the picture it paints of the US Fish and Wildlife Service is distinctly unflattering. The lead FWS biologist on a local jaguar project knew of the overlapping mountain lion capture and jaguar photography projects, and had expressed concern about the possibility of a jaguar capture. But when AZGFD stonewalled him, the FWS biologist meekly shut up. He did not tell his superiors, nor

did he review Arizona's permit until after the death of Macho B. He told the IG investigators that he was "intimidated" by AZGFD's "attitude that [it] could do whatever it wanted in Arizona."

The IG also found that the FWS field supervisor, who authorized the euthanization of Macho B and treatment of his remains, did not know what a necropsy was or what procedures should be used to preserve tissues for subsequent testing. Nor did he bother to find out before authorizing a procedure that made it impossible to get useful information from some of the cat's organs.

The report does not consider the larger issues raised by this incident. But it reinforces the picture that emerged last year of an arrogant but ill-informed state agency operating with little or no oversight by a much less arrogant but similarly ill-informed FWS. Whatever the outcome of criminal or civil enforcement proceedings, the Macho B incident should prompt state wildlife agencies to re-examine the extent to which their management of game or non-endangered wildlife might affect listed species and FWS to tighten up its procedures for providing federal funding and permits in support of state wildlife management. It also suggests that FWS needs to better educate its employees on their responsibilities and authorities, provide them with the backing they need to stand up to their state counterparts, and make clear to those state officials the need for specific permit review of activities that might result in incidental take of federally listed species.