

Ecology of neotropical cats

Neotropical cats. Ecology and conservation. T. G. de Oliveira. Universidade Federal do Maranhão, São Luís, 1994, 222 pp. Index ISBN 85-85048-01-8.

This book is a comprehensive summary of the available information on the ecology and conservation of all 10 species of cats inhabiting the Neotropics (Central and South America). The text consists of two main parts.

Part I: "Species accounts" shows how little is known about the biology and ecology of these cats. It describes present distribution, life history, habitat, home range and activity patterns as well as the feeding ecology of particular species. Among the community of neotropical felids, only two cats: the jaguar *Panthera onca* and ocelot *Felis pardalis* appear to have been studied in any detail. Unfortunately, the data on other species is much more limited or even absent with the exception of some distribution data and small amounts of information on life histories studied in zoos. One example of this lack of information is illustrated by the Andean cat *Felis jacobita*. Data available for this species clearly indicate the need for future studies to supplement the limited amount of information currently available.

Part II: "Ecology and Conservation" consists of three independent sections: (1) Interspecific relations, (2) Skin trade, and (3) Status, conservation and perspectives. In the first section the author discusses the problem of the coexistence of different cat species living sympatrically. He tries to answer the question: whether competition has taken place in the evolutionary past (ie, competition between currently "ecologically – isolated" species no longer exists) or still takes place? On the basis of hitherto existing studies on feeding ecology, habitat use and activity patterns of particular cat species he concludes that simultaneous habitation of a common area by different species of felids is only possible through their ecological separation.

Oliveira also emphasizes the necessity to keep predators in Neotropics as a key to regulating the numbers in prey populations, especially paca *Agouti paca* and agouti *Dasyprocta* spp. which may depress the regeneration of economically important plants with large seeds. He states that harvesting felids in Latin America is still legal despite their drastically decreasing numbers.

In the section concerning skin trade, the author suggests that the current harvest of Neotropical cats should stop because of: (1) limited knowledge about the felids population dynamic in Neotropics, (2) the possibility of occasionally trapping the most vulnerable and rare species, and (3) legal trade in one country may promote illegal hunting in other areas where the cats are really threatened.

In the section "Status, conservation and perspectives" the main factors influencing the felid populations in Latin America are shown to be habitat destruction, hunting and poaching with the additional threats of genetic losses due to fragmented and isolated populations. The author concludes that preserving viable populations of Neotropical felids is possible via a number of means including: (1) the preservation of habitats of sufficient size and productivity, (2) establishment of the distribution of each species and their habitat requirements, and (3) the establishment of suitable legislation to protect the individual species and their prey.

Unfortunately, there are some technical mistakes, eg switching two pages (indicated in errata) which disturb reading. There is also no reference to Rosenzweig (1966) cited on page 92.

The book is valuable both for amateurs and professionals as a source of information about little known predators. It is also a source for the encouragement of relevant research projects for the future. It serves as a report of the current status of Neotropical cats which is important in understanding their need for protection and conservation. This book will be very useful for European readers as it presents data which is scattered in many publications some of which can be difficult to source.