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So. Ariz. man pleads guilty in jaguar's death

By BOB CHRISTIE (AP) – 3 days ago

PHOENIX — A southern Arizona biologist pleaded guilty on Friday to a misdemeanor federal charge for his role in the 2009 trapping and subsequent death of a rare jaguar known as "Macho B."

Emil McCain, 31, of Patagonia, entered his plea to illegally "taking" an endangered species in U.S. District Court in Tucson and was immediately sentenced to five years probation. McCain was also barred from being employed or involved in any project or job involving large wild cats, according to his plea agreement.

McCain worked with the Borderlands Jaguar Detection Project, which was contracted by a joint New Mexico-Arizona jaguar conservation team to study the elusive big cats.

A Game and Fish employee who worked with McCain has been fired.

A U.S. attorney's office spokesman said the criminal investigation was ongoing but wouldn't comment on whether others might also be charged. Another investigation into the matter by the state wildlife department was also ongoing.

Macho B was trapped on Feb. 18, 2009, fitted with a radio collar and released. Game and Fish initially called it an "inadvertent capture" and a potential treasure trove for scientists trying to determine if the cats lived in the U.S. or just were occasional visitors from Mexico.

The jaguar was recaptured due to health problems and euthanized on March 2, 2009. It was the only known wild jaguar in the United States.

It wasn't until several months later that questions began to arise about whether the jaguar had been intentionally the target of Game and Fish trappers who were looking for cougars and bears.

According to the plea agreement McCain signed, he placed jaguar scat or told a woman on the trapping team to place jaguar scat at three snare sites in an attempt to capture and trap the jaguar.

McCain knew a jaguar had recently been in the remote area between Arivaca and Nogales and the Game and Fish team he was working with only had authorization to trap mountain lions and bears for research, his plea stated.

"We now know that McCain acted in a personal capacity to intentionally capture a jaguar," Arizona Game and Fish said in a statement. "McCain's admission of guilt supports the Arizona Game and Fish Department's longstanding assertion that agency personnel did not set out with intention to capture a jaguar.

"Until the Department has access to the federal investigation, the Department's own internal investigation continues to be open and ongoing."

McCain's lawyer, Alfred Donau, said his client has already taken a job out of the country as a wildlife biologist but wouldn't disclose where. Donau told The Associated Press Friday that while McCain was remorseful the jaguar had died, the trapping would have had much different results if the cat had lived because he was seeking scientific data for conservation purposes.

"If this jaguar hadn't been the equivalent of 100 years old human age and he lived it would have been a huge boon to scientific research, because we would have known with a collar on him whether or not he was from Mexico or the native range was Arizona," Donau said.

"If the cat hadn't died, there would have been a much different point of view of what took place here. This isn't a case where somebody went out and tried to kill an animal."

The largest cats native to the Western hemisphere live primarily in Mexico, Central and South America. But they're known to roam in southern Arizona and New Mexico and are the only cat native to North America that roars.

Jaguars were thought to have been eliminated in the U.S. by 1990 until two were spotted in 1996 in southern Arizona. The capture of Macho B was the first time one had been trapped in the U.S.

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