

Study Investigates TX Ocelot Reintroduction

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A team of collaborators will study the viability of potential actions designed to reestablish a population of ocelots in South Texas to help increase their numbers in the U.S.

The collaboration includes Texas A&M Natural Resources Institute, a unit of Texas A&M AgriLife, in partnership with East Foundation, the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute, Lindner Center for Conservation and Research of Endangered Wildlife at the Cincinnati Zoo, the University of Tennessee Comparative and Experimental Medicine Program and Center for Wildlife Health, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.



Ocelot

The project, “Developing and Assessing Strategies for Reintroducing Ocelots to Historical Texas Habitat,” will explore the feasibility of reintroducing the endangered ocelot to a portion of their historical range in Texas that is distinct from known populations’ currently occupied habitat.

The project’s exploratory research efforts include assessments of:

- Where ecologically and socio-politically suitable ocelot habitat may occur in South Texas and ultimately identify potential reintroduction sites.
- The methods for sourcing individuals to create a new population of ocelots.
- Strategies for their successful release into the wild.
- Development of long-term management plans for reintroduced ocelots.

- The long-term viability of a reintroduced population given ecological constraints.

“Historically, we found that the ocelots’ range in the U.S. extended throughout Arizona, Texas, Arkansas and Louisiana,” said Roel Lopez, Ph.D., director of the Texas A&M Natural Resources Institute. “Over the years, however, historic overexploitation from unregulated hunting and trapping plus destruction or loss of habitat left ocelots vulnerable. Now, as we’ve discovered, resident breeding ocelots in the U.S. number fewer than 100 in the wild, making this exploratory process critical.”

Ocelot recovery considerations

With policy initiatives led by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the partners will incorporate the results of this research effort with Endangered Species Act, ESA, or Safe Harbor Agreement options. The goal is to allow ocelot recovery efforts to move forward, including reintroductions, while also protecting the rights and interests of private landowners.

After assessing these research results and exploring different ESA regulatory possibilities, the project partners may propose to pursue actual ocelot reintroduction.

“Given the strong desire to provide regulatory relief and assurances to landowners, we anticipate a possible reintroduction proposal would be subject to a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service rulemaking or permitting process,” said East Foundation CEO Neal Wilkins. “Either tool will include the opportunity for public comment and an extensive coordination effort with landowners interested in participating in ocelot reintroduction efforts.”

Ultimately, an ocelot reintroduction would be aimed at contributing to ocelot recovery under the ESA. Creating a new population of ocelots in Texas would increase the total number of wild, resident ocelots in the state, grow ocelots’ current range, and expand the genetic diversity of ocelots in Texas, Lopez said.

The project is currently only exploring scientific material and existing ocelot research to assess paths forward for ocelot conservation. No decision-making on ocelot reintroduction is occurring at this time, but collaborators are looking for input from interested stakeholders.

“Prior to any decision to proceed with a proposal for reintroduction, the partners will conduct an extensive public outreach effort to identify and address potential concerns regarding a reintroduction effort and to ensure landowner coordination, engagement and, hopefully, support,” said Brittany Wegner, a project specialist with the Natural Resources Institute.

“We invite anyone who is interested in this exploratory process to visit the new Recovering Texas Ocelots website at <https://recovertexasocelots.org/> and to sign up to receive project updates via email, which will ensure continued involvement and information as the project proceeds.”