

This image and others were discovered Aug. 6 on a field camera by one of some 40 volunteer citizen-scientists who help monitor endangered jaguars and ocelots roaming in southern Arizona for the nonprofit University of Arizona Wild Cat Research and Conservation Center in Tucson, Arizona. (Courtesy of the University of Arizona Wild Cat Research and Conservation Center)



by Anita Snow

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The Trump administration is muscling forward with plans to wall off a critical international wildlife corridor, setting up construction camps to erect a 30-foot barrier along one of the few remaining gaps on the U.S.-Mexico border.

The first of the steel bollards are expected to go up in late summer across a 24.7-mile stretch of the San Rafael Valley grasslands, halting cross-border movement of animals in an area of extreme biodiversity.

The wildlife includes bobcats, speedy pronghorn, pig-like javelina, gregarious Gambel's quail and endangered jaguars such as the one that was detected on wildlife cameras six times in August at four different locations in southern Arizona.

"It's super concerning that with the technology we have available today we are using a type of border security that is so detrimental to wildlife," said Susan Malusa, a Catholic biogeographer who heads the University of Arizona's nonprofit Wild Cat Research and Conservation Center that detected the jaguar earlier this month.

"We have deep social responsibilities not to use and lose our Earth," said Malusa, who also holds a master's degree in theology. "This is not only a Catholic idea. We do not get to judge what can be expendable as a species."



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American bishops along the U.S.-Mexico border spoke out in February 2019 against President Donald Trump's declaration of a national emergency so he could order construction of a barrier in the remaining gaps along the border.

They called the additional barrier "a symbol of division and animosity between two friendly countries" and said they would "destroy parts of the environment, disrupt the livelihoods of ranchers and farmers, weaken cooperation and commerce between border communities."

The statement echoed an urgent call to care for the Earth expressed by Pope Francis a decade ago in his encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home."

"In assessing the environmental impact of any project, concern is usually shown for its effects on soil, water and air, yet few careful studies are made of its impact on biodiversity, as if the loss of species or animals and plant groups were of little importance," says the encyclical's section on biodiversity.

It adds: "Highways, new plantations, the fencing-off of certain areas, the damming of water sources, and similar developments, crowd out natural habitats and, at times, break them up in such a way that animal populations can no longer migrate or roam freely. As a result, some species face extinction."



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Franciscan Sr. Joan Brown, who is deeply familiar with environmental issues in the U.S. Southwest, said that the wall construction project in southern Arizona "is so immoral," especially in the face of climate change.

"We do not have a right to continue to act as God creating walls and borders that lead to death on migration routes that have existed for millennia," said Brown, the former and founding director of New Mexico and El Paso Interfaith Power and Light.

The somewhat rare discovery Aug. 6 of an endangered jaguar roaming in southern Arizona shows the importance of open corridors for wildlife to roam freely to hunt and mate, said Malusa. A century ago, jaguars traveled as far north as the Grand Canyon, but most are now found in Mexico except for an occasional wandering male.

Malusa said that Jaguar No. 4 was detected on a camera by one of some 40 volunteer citizen-scientists who are critical to the research effort, which operates with grants and small donations. The field camera's exact location has not been disclosed to protect the animal's safety.

The nonprofit Sky Island Alliance says that its extensive wildlife camera monitoring in the valley has detected fewer than one person per camera every 10 months for the last five years. More than half of them were law enforcement agents, ranchers and people legally on federal lands for recreation.



This image taken on Nov. 30, 2024, from Montezuma's Pass in southern Arizona's Coronado National Memorial shows the sprawling San Rafael Valley, home to a vast biodiversity of fauna including black bears and the occasional jaguar or ocelot that will be cut off from Mexico by a border wall that the Trump administration intends to start building later this August. (Anita Snow)

Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem in June announced the waiver of laws, including the National Environmental Policy Act, to expedite several wall construction projects along about 36 miles in New Mexico and Arizona, with the largest stretch in the San Rafael Valley.

The agency said then that the construction projects "are critical steps to secure the southern border and reinforce our commitment to border security" and would "ensure the expeditious construction of physical barriers and roads, by minimizing the risk of administrative delays."

In response to a request by the National Catholic Reporter for further comment, U.S. Customs and Border Protection said in an Aug. 12 statement that it could not offer more specifics about what it refers to as the Tucson Sonoita Wall Project because of ongoing litigation.

The environmental groups Center for Biological Diversity and Conservation CATalyst have sued the administration to halt construction, saying that the government violated the constitution by waiving environmental laws without consulting Congress.



This Aug. 8, 2025, image taken on shows the sun over San Rafael Ranch near the international border in southern Arizona, home to a vast biodiversity of fauna that will be cut off from Mexico by a border wall that the Trump administration intends to start building later this month (August 2025). (Ross Humphreys)

"The border wall will have irreparable impacts on the ecosystem that will be felt for generations," said biologist Eamon Harrity, wildlife program manager for Sky Island

Alliance, which strives to protect "sky islands," which are isolated mountain ranges that rise out of the desert in Arizona and Mexico.

Far to the east near Arizona's border with New Mexico, Sky Island Alliance is monitoring the long-term effects of one section of the wall erected during Trump's first administration on the wildlife inside the San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge. Fauna in the sensitive wetland include white-tailed deer, black bears, skunks, bats and badgers. There are also more than 300 bird species including various sandpipers, egrets, hawks, bald eagles, elf owls and yellow-billed cuckoos.

The potential effects of the construction on area water are also of concern.



This Aug. 7, 2025, image shows clouds over San Rafael Ranch near the international border in southern Arizona, home to a vast biodiversity of fauna that will be cut off from Mexico by a border wall that the Trump administration intends to start building later this month (August 2025). (Ross Humphreys)

Ross Humphreys, who raises award-winning Angus cattle on his sprawling San Rafael Ranch near the border worries that the millions of gallons of water needed for cement to affix the bollards into deep ditches will further draw down aquifers in a drought-plagued area.

"They'll be drilling ungodly amounts of water," said Humphreys. "But I've had my head down. I'm just a rancher trying to raise my cattle and take it to market."

Biologist Myles Traphagen, borderlands coordinator for the nonprofit Wildlands Network, calls the valley "an ecological gem" and notes that it has been an important migration corridor for animals and humans going back millennia.

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From nearby Montezuma Peak at the Coronado National Memorial, visitors can see the expansive valley where Spanish conquistador Francisco Vázquez de Coronado led an expedition of Europeans into what later became the United States.

Traphagen hopes federal officials will consider his group's recommendation to create openings of 8 x 11 inches in the wall to allow smaller wildlife to pass and include flood gates that can be kept open for larger mammals.

"We can only make recommendations," said Traphagen. "It will fall to what they decide to do during construction, and the sector chiefs."