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New sightings of the mountain tapir in the Central Andes of Ecuador by camera trapping

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Background

Since 2007, the Project of Conservation of the Mountain Tapir (*Tapirus pinchaque*) (PCTA), has been carrying out actions focused on conservation of remaining populations of the species in the eastern slopes of the Ecuadorian`s central Andes, through three main topics: i) research and field monitoring, ii) capacity building, local training, environmental education and communication iii) and conservation through non government protected areas (Tapia *et al.*, 2008).

Regarding the first item, we are conducting research on activity patterns of the mountain tapir in the eastern slopes of Tungurahua volcano, in order to evaluate social behavior and activity patterns of the species in the study area by using camera trapping techniques. Here, we report new sightings of *T. pinchaque* in this area, which increase records of the species in the central Andes, previous to those reported in the past (Reyes-Puig *et al.*, 2007, 2008) including historic/anecdotal records reported elsewhere by local people. The abundance of direct sightings and indirect evidence of tapir occurrence enforce the potentiality of this zone to maintain viable populations of *T. pinchaque* in the central Andes.

Recent records by camera traps

Historically, anecdotal reports by local villagers and naturalists persisted in the literature (Martínez, 1933) in this part of the Ecuadorian central Andes. These records, as well as scientific reports of tapir populations in the central Andes (Sangay and Llanganates National Parks) (Downer, 1996-2001), noted the importance of this zone for mountain tapir conservation in its whole distribution range. Nevertheless, geographic

distribution maps designed by Downer (1997) for this region reveal numerous gaps and are not up-to-date at the present. Thus, new confirmed records by direct sightings and visual information are of importance in order to update the distribution range of the species and aggregate information to the literature.

As part of an undergraduate thesis on activity patterns of *T. pinchaque*, we registered the first sightings of mountain tapirs in the central Andes of Ecuador with application of camera trapping methods. During field trips in the end of 2010 and the first part of 2011, several new records of mountain tapirs have been recorded in the eastern Tungurahua volcano, San Antonio de Puntzán communitarian reserve, mainly at the salt lick called la cascada de las Dantas (Fig. 1).

The first pictures were registered on December 2010 on a tapir track in cloud forest; many other species (i. e. terrestrial birds and mammals) were also documented in this site. Also, camera traps located at sampling sites near to river borders and salt licks of the Río de la Sal sector, recorded a pair of tapirs, as shown on figures 1-3.

Recently, new sightings were recorded at 4 camera trap stations in the humid cloud forests of the study area. This includes a first record of a female with her calf by camera trapping in Ecuador and suggests that the calf may have been born few months ago. Other species sharing habitat with tapirs in the zone, were also photo-trapped, including bears (2b) and pumas (Figure 3b). Some pictures were trapped during the day and night suggesting that the mountain tapir could be a bimodal activity pattern, therefore this hypothesis will be determinate in the future.

The reporting of these new records is preliminary and this research is still ongoing, but new direct sightings of mountain tapirs in Ecuador are increasing

Figure 2. Sightings of mountain tapirs by camera trapping in central Andes of Ecuador. 2a) tapir and 2b) bear on cloud forest, 1c) river borders and 1d) salt licks records. Pictures: PCTA (2011).

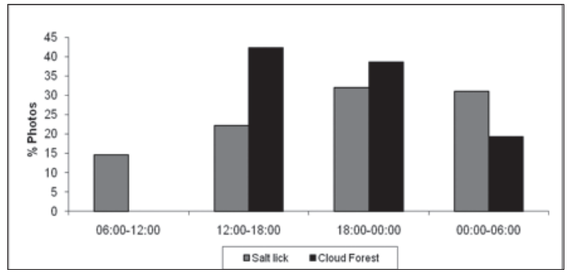

Figure 1. Preliminary results about activity patterns of mountain tapir, photo´s percentage and period of time at the Salt lick "Cascada de las Dantas" and cloud forest.

knowledge about social behavior (activity patterns) of remaining tapir populations in the region and filling out geographic gaps in order to update mountain tapir geographic occurrence in its whole distribution range. Furthermore, field research like the present one, constitutes an application of the objectives, priority actions and goals of the National Strategy for Tapir Conservation in Ecuador (TSG, 2011), related to its second strategic principle, named In-situ conservation.

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Figure 3. 3a) First record of tapir calf with camera traps in the central Andes of Ecuador at cloud forest. 3b) Puma in cloud forest. Pictures: PCTA (2011).