

Tungurahua Volcano: An Estrategic Refuge for Mountain Tapirs in Ecuador

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«A la cabeza de los pensamientos de los pobladores de la región, merece figurar la danta o Gran Bestia, animal al que tenía yo por semi-fabuloso en mis exploraciones; pues siempre que oía que en tal o cuál lugar abundan las dantas me sonreía con cierto aire de duda; pero ahora estoy convencido de que en los bosques de los contrafuertes del Tungurahua, existen real y efectivamente dantas, y a juzgar por los caminos construidos por ellas, que se cruzan en todas direcciones, y por la enorme cantidad de excrementos que se encuentra de ellos, su número debe ser considerable.»

**Nicolás G. Martínez. Hacienda San Antonio.
Noviembre de 1910.**

The Tungurahua volcano is located in the Central region of the Ecuadorian Andes. With an altitude of 5,023 m a.s.l., it is one of the most active volcanoes of the world. For centuries this mountain has been modelating the variety of local ecosystems due to continuous eruptions and it has regulated the dynamics of one of the richest Andean fauna and flora.

Baños – the closest town to the volcano – is a small vilage in the doors of the Central Ecuadorian Amazonia. In the past decades most researchers have neglected this area in search of more diverse habitats in lowland ecosystems (Lynch and Duellman 1980). For that reason, there are just historic or anecdotic registers of the fauna, but no long-term studies that depict the faunal composition of the region.

Paradoxically, this area is one of the most well preserved of the Ecuadorian Andes and, because of its connectivity with other protected areas (i. e., Sangay National Park, San Antonio Forest Reserve), represents a strategic corridor for the survival of the endangered mountain tapir (*Tapirus pinchaque*). Here, we present the most recent direct record of a mountain tapir in the eastern flanks of the Tungurahua volcano.

Access to the wild domains of mountain tapirs demanded three hours following tapir trails in a nearly inaccessible Andean forest and across the 300 to 500 m

tall rock walls that raise from the bottom of the valley of the Salt River (“Rio de la Sal”). The sighting of two individuals was made at an altitude of 2,600 m a.s.l., beside natural springs of mineral waters that come from the volcano and could be used by tapirs as a source of salts and minerals. The surrounding forest is composed of endengared trees like Sisin (*Podocarpus* sp.) and Palma de Ramos (*Ceroxylon* sp.), with other typical elements of cloud forest like moss, lichens, bromeliads and orchids (Figure 1).

The first tapir was seen while crossing the river at a distance of 30 m and heading to the forest in the direction of the páramo. After this encounter, we walked approximately 200 m and arrived at a natural spring where we saw another individual hiding between rocks and vegetation (Figure 2). The skin of the posterior part of this second animal appeared to be affected because it lacks a patch of hair*. We supposed this animal to be unhealthy because it did not escape rapidly and we could even touch it before it ran away.

Several direct observations have been made in the last years in Tungurahua, but without adequate record-



Figure 1. Andean Cloud forest habitat of the mountain tapir on the eastern slopes of the Tungurahua Volcano, Ecuador, ca. 2,600 m a.s.l. The circle shows a fleeing tapir. Credit: Juan Pablo Reyes Puig.



Figure 2. Direct sighting of a mountain tapir in its natural habitat on the Tungurahua Volcano, Ecuador. Credit: Juan Pablo Reyes Puig.

ing and verifiable evidence. In the surrounding areas (i. e. Runtun, Pondoá) indirect observations (tracks and feces) evidence other mountain tapir groups that could be more or less connected with the Tungurahua population. Historical reports (e.g., Martínez 1933) mention that this mammal was common at the beginning of the 20th century but, according to the local inhabitants, the tapir populations were severely threatened by hunting until 1990, when this activity was forbidden.

In addition, the constant eruptions of the Tungurahua volcano have stopped the colonization of the region with the consequent improvement of the natural areas surrounding it. Due to its inaccessibility, the influence of the eruptions in keeping humans at bay, and its connectivity with other protected zones, this area could constitute one of the last refuges for mountain tapirs in the Ecuadorian Andes.

The tapir observations described herein were made while conducting a monitoring project on endangered wildlife at the Tungurahua Volcano, with support from Ecociencia and Conservation International.

References

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**N.B. patches of bare skin in the hind quarters of Mountain Tapirs are not uncommon and at present it is unknown whether these are indicators of the health or age of the animals.*

Occurrence of Baird's Tapir Outside Protected Areas in Belize

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Abstract

We conducted a preliminary survey of the presence of the endangered Baird's tapir outside protected areas in Belize during March to May 2006. We found that Baird's tapir occurred in every district of Belize and that hunting of the species took place but was not widespread. We make suggestions for further conservation and management of the species outside protected areas.

Introduction

Baird's tapir (*Tapirus bairdii*) occurs from south eastern Mexico to northern Colombia. The species is an important food resource for local people and plays an important role as seed disperser for many plant species. Currently it is considered vulnerable to local extinction triggered by habitat loss and over-hunting (Naranjo & Bodmer 2002) and is classified as endangered (IUCN, 2006).