

Project Update: May 2021

Collaboration with Working Dogs for Conservation

In early May 2021, we were joined in the field by the WD4C team: Megan Parker, co-founder and research director, Rob Terwillinger as field assistant, and the amazing Tule. Tule is a 6-year-old Belgian Malinois dog, trained specifically for this collaboration to find scats of Mesoamerica's most endangered wild cat species, the oncilla. Wildlife scats are not easy to find in natural habitats, especially those of such a small, rare and elusive species. Here is where these kinds of collaborations are vital to meet our objectives with highly important conservation outcomes.

Based on our camera trap data we selected the three areas where we obtained the highest number of oncilla records during our monitoring surveys. After 12 days of exhaustive field work and many walking kilometres, we have managed to collect six invaluable samples. While some of these might not be of an oncilla (because as humans' dogs can make mistakes) we are confident in Megan's vast experience and Tule's exceptional nose. We are looking forward to performing DNA extractions so we can be certain about our samples' origin. These samples will be vital to determine the oncilla current taxonomic status. Is the Central American subspecies actually a unique and different species from its closest relatives in north-western Colombia? More importantly, this will shed a light about this species population health status by studying its genetic structure in Costa Rica.

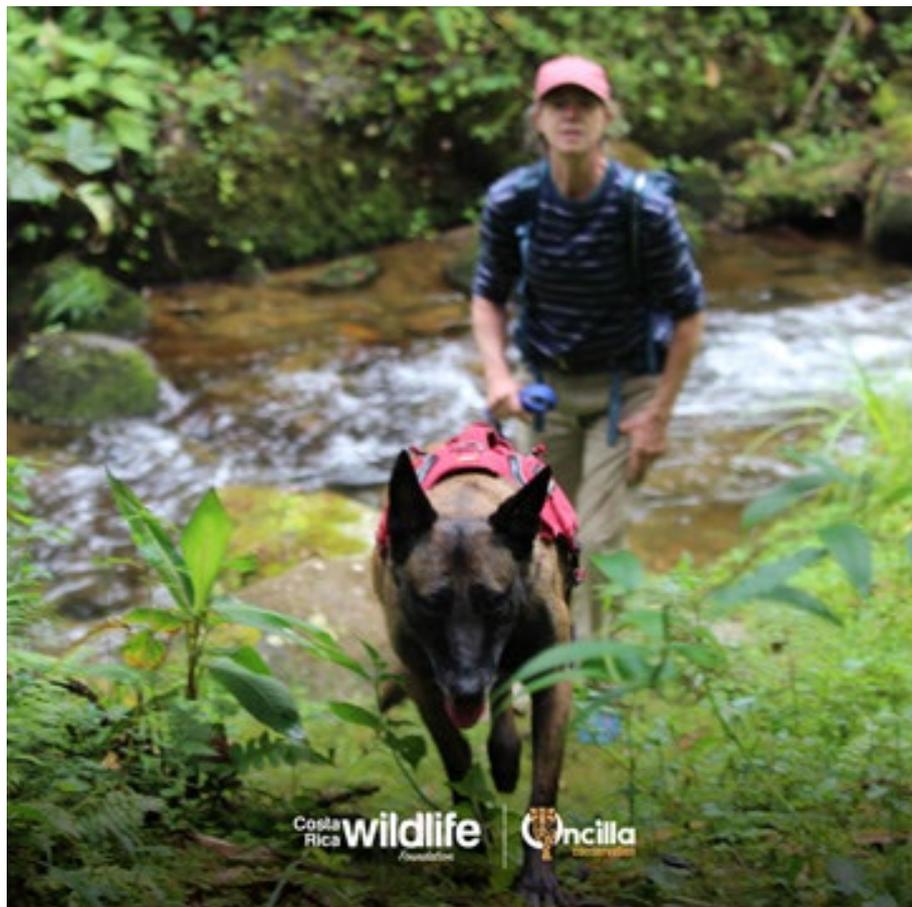


Fig. 1. Tule and Megan Parker from Working Dogs for Conservation looking for oncilla faeces in the Talamanca Mountain Range, Costa Rica. © Patricia Blanco/CRWF.

Communities' educational workshops

As part of the educational workshops, we visited the communities of Herradura de Rivas and San Jerónimo de San Pedro, at the foot of Chirripó National Park, home of the oncilla. Through the workshop "Getting to Know the Oncilla" we presented to the community members, the special situation this threatened small wild cat has, deepening in topics related to conservation conflicts to evaluate the situation, the needs of its people and the impact that occurs in these communities around the oncilla. Children interested in learning about the species that inhabit the wooded areas surrounding their homes also participated in these workshops, identifying their interests and needs for the educational process to be carried out. Through an experiential activity, we look to create a personalised and real processes, with open and exploratory educational resources. We have managed to start this process in the best way, and many more activities await us!



Fig. 2. Educational workshops were delivered within the San Jerónimo and Herradura communities. © Patricia Blanco/CRWF.



Fig. 3. Below. Children from rural communities were involved in the educational workshops. © Patricia Blanco/CRWF.



Fig. 4. Injured oncilla was carefully attended and successfully reintroduced to its natural habitat. © Janet Sandí/TRR.

Rescue Oncilla

One Thursday evening I received a call from our partners at the Toucan Rescue Ranch (TRR). Apparently, a hurt small wild cat was observed walking randomly on the edge of a busy road. National environmental authorities (MINAE) attended the case and decided to take the injured animal to TRR. "Don't say anything yet, but I think an oncilla just arrived at our rescue centre!"

Leslie Howle, founder and director of TRR, told me. Apparently, the animal was hit slightly in the head by a car, fortunately this only resulted in the loss of a fang and slight swelling to the muzzle. After being evaluated by the veterinarians, they decided to keep him with them for a few days to monitor his health and then reintegrate him to his habitat once he has recovered. In a coordinated effort between TRR, Oncilla Conservation, and MINAE, the decision was made to release the affected individual in a restricted area of the Tapanti National Park, a cloud forest with more than 550 km² of protected land close to the area where it was found. In addition to reintroducing the oncilla to its habitat, we took the opportunity to collect some faeces and the lost fang for our genetic analysis. At the same time, we decided to document the activity and show how amazing things can be achieved when people get together and collaborate for the greater good of wildlife conservation. You can watch this exciting event's video through the following link:

https://www.instagram.com/tv/CMngPWIBDOo/?utm_medium=copy_link