



## Animals and the War on Drugs

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**C. Lou Hamilton**

**Independent scholar / writer**

**Abstract:** The international war on drugs has been roundly criticised by drug reformers as economically costly, ineffective and catastrophic for human rights and communities. This essay reflects on some of the interconnections between the war on drugs' attacks on vulnerable people and environments, and the vulnerability of other species. I argue that ending the war on drugs is an animal justice issue due to the direct and indirect (but not unforeseeable) impacts of 'narco' economics and militarised responses to the production and distribution of illegal drugs.

**Keywords:** Animals, Latin America, jaguars, Mexico, security, war on drugs

When I start to think about the tricky but necessary work of understanding how mass forms of violence against vulnerable people and vulnerable animals are intertwined, I am often drawn to Mexico.

In Mexico it is impossible to escape stories of violence against people, even in the middle-class tourist bubble in which I typically travel. In Mexico the terror related to the drug trade and the state war against it is rarely off the front pages. Yet in Mexico I have also found challenges to that tired cliché that circulates closer to home in London: that caring for animals is a luxury, one afforded only to people who do not know oppression themselves – or worse, privileged people who don't care about the suffering of other human beings. In Mexico there are thriving vegan and animal rights movements. Within and beyond these circles I've heard many stories about animals.

While out for drinks with a small group of friends on a warm night in a southern Mexico City neighbourhood, someone tells me they've recently spoken to a biologist who said that the habitats of the country's jaguars are being threatened by cartels overtaking land for drug cultivation and transportation. Later this same person recounts that they migrated to the capital in part because the levels of murder and disappearances of people made it increasingly impossible to live in the state where they were born.

This story has returned to me over the past year, as I have helped to redraft the drug policy of the Green Party of England and Wales. No, this is not a party-political broadcast. Nor is it a detailed examination of the impact of drug production and trafficking on other-than-human animals. Instead, what follows is a brief consideration of why ending the war on drugs is an animal justice issue, and how this relates to wider questions of environmental and social justice.

## **The war on drugs**

The 'war on drugs' refers to a series of treaties, laws, policies and practices enacted with the aim of eradicating the production, trade and consumption of illegal drugs.<sup>1</sup> While individual countries and regions have their own drug policies, international efforts to eliminate drug production and trade are overseen by the United Nations, which set the stage for the

prohibitionist approach with its 1961 *Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs*. The war on drugs aims to eliminate illegal drugs through criminalisation, and military and police intervention. For more than half a century these approaches have been a resounding failure. Instead of creating a drug-free world, the war on drugs has helped to nurture a transnational and highly adaptable illegal trade, with devastating impacts on areas of production, trade and consumption. In its 2016 *Alternative World Drug Report*, the UK-based Transform Drug Policy Foundation lists a series of costs arising from the failed war on drugs, including: threatening public health and international security; undermining development and human rights; promoting discrimination against people who use drugs; and causing deforestation and pollution (Rolles et al., 'Alternative World Drug Report'). Despite this, most countries in the world continue to follow a prohibitionist approach to drugs.

Campaigns for drug reform are based on evidence that the violence and harm that accompany drug production, trade and use are not caused primarily by the drugs themselves but are largely a result of prohibitionist policies. Drug reformers call instead for the legalisation and regulation of drugs, led by the principles of public health and harm reduction. I was motivated to get involved in drug policy reform by an awareness of the huge human costs of drug prohibition in Britain and elsewhere, including organised criminal and police violence against vulnerable communities, the stigmatisation and injustices experienced by many people who use drugs, and the disproportionate arrest, incarceration and, in extreme cases, killing of poor people and people of colour for drug-related offences (Shiner et al.). In the process, I have also learned more about the impact of the war on drugs on other species, and how the very language with which the war on drugs is presented and justified works to construct certain animals and human beings as other, thereby coding them as dispensable and helping to justify violence against them. For me, keeping animals in mind as I research proposals for drug reform is one aspect of doing contextual ethical veganism. It's an example of how we can bring our commitment to justice for human and other-than-human animals to all areas of our activism and lives.

## Jaguar tales and dog fights

Since the 1970s, with the initiation of the United States War on Drugs under President Richard Nixon, parts of South and Central America as well as Mexico have been a major focus of illegal drug production and trade as well as military eradication efforts, or ‘supply-side drug reduction policies’ (McSweeney 49). Over the past few decades criminal organisations have taken over large tracts of land in Latin America for cultivation, trafficking routes and related activities. In parts of Mexico, Brazil and Central America this activity threatens the safety and economies of local people, among them many Indigenous smallholders (McSweeney), as well the natural environment and animal habitats, including those of the jaguar (Hershaw; Reeves).

Jaguars are the largest of the wild cats native to the Americas. In the cultures of precolonial Mesoamerica (the area covering what is today central and southern Mexico and much of Central America) jaguars symbolised power and were typically associated with rulers, warriors and hunters. They were also considered animals who could move between the physical and spiritual worlds. In contemporary Latin America the large cats symbolise connection to the land and environment, spirituality and Indigenous identity (Benson; Navarro 28–29). Today the name ‘Jaguar’ has been appropriated by everyone from car makers and coffee producers to sports heroes and leaders of Mexican drug cartels (Borunda). In ‘narcoculture’ – the representation of drug trafficking and the war on drugs in music, novels, films, television and other areas of popular culture (Cabañas) – jaguars often denote the exotic, violent and *machista* Latin American ‘narco’ (‘Art and Making’).

Animals are so much more than metaphors for human fantasies and experience. But metaphors also tell us about so much: legacies of colonialism; interconnected processes of militarisation, animalisation, racism and class oppression; the exploitation of humans and other animals as cannon fodder in wars throughout history. A recent article in *The Guardian* opens with a reference to the ongoing ‘merciless dogfight between Mexican drug cartels’ (Phillips). The use of jaguar and dog fight analogies in international reporting on the Mexican drug trade are examples of how, in the words of philosopher Kelly Oliver, animals often figure as ‘part of an imaginary configuration wherein human beings are seen as dangerous by virtue of a process of

racialization involving animals'. Moreover, 'the ways in which human beings treat animals reflects on their own figuration as animals' (494).

The 'dogfight' reference depicts Mexican cartel members as dogs even as it establishes Mexicans generally as beasts who abuse animals (the implication being that dog fighting is a typical Mexican activity), while the jaguar metaphor paints drug traffickers as deadly predators. Other news stories about Mexican 'narcos' make reference to their penchant for large personal zoos, filled with wild animals (Rosenberg). These reports liken cartel members to their exotic pets while projecting responsibility for human violence against endangered species onto Mexicans as a whole. In these examples, the war on drugs is represented as a just war through the mechanism of what Dinesh Wadiwel calls 'critter nationalism': a form of nationalism that establishes white, Western 'identity as aligned with a commitment to animal welfare and non-cruelty; while non Western (countries) are reflective of systemic cruelty, which are in some ways tied to traditional cultural norms and practices' (285).

### **Cocaine and cows**

The extravagant menageries of cartel leaders may make for good stories. But the relationship between drug trafficking and the consumption of animals takes in much more banal and widespread human habits. One of the main activities of criminal organisations in parts of Central and South America is cattle ranching (Reeves). Even before the wildfires threatening the Brazilian Amazon made international headlines in summer 2019, environmentalists in Central America were warning of the illegal clearing of protected forests. As one commentator put it: 'Cocaine and cows may seem like an odd combination, but ranching has proved to be an ideal way to launder drug money' (Reeves).

According to the geographer Kendra McSweeney, cows raised illegally in Central America often end up as dead meat in Mexico, a country with a growing demand for beef (cited in Reeves). This demand is itself a legacy of European colonialism: cows – like pigs, sheep and goats – arrived on ships carrying Spanish conquerors in the early sixteenth century. In this way we can understand the war on drugs as one episode of a much wider and longer imperial war

which has replaced rich ecosystems and the cultivation of diverse plant crops with ranches, mines and monocultures.

Another legacy of colonialism and subsequent independence are the borders that today divide the different nations of Central and North America. Bodies move in, around and across these borders in very different ways. Live and dead cows move within and between countries as ‘goods’ governed by international trade agreements. Drugs are smuggled over borders in massive quantities. Some people move with relative freedom while for others – including the undocumented Central American migrants heading into and through Mexico towards the United States – these crossings are increasingly restricted and dangerous. All these movements are caught up in the policies and practices of the war on drugs.

### **Animals with/out borders**

Contemporary anti-migration policies in the United States are often justified as a necessary part of the war on drugs: President Donald Trump claims that his notorious (and as yet immaterial) border wall will halt the importation of drugs brought into the US from Mexico by undocumented migrants sneaking over the border. Evidence provided by academics and the US Department of Justice Drug Enforcement Agency, however, demonstrates that most illicit drugs, including cocaine and heroin, are transported through official entry points (Department of Justice Drug Enforcement Agency; Talbot). There is some evidence of overlap between drug trafficking and the illegal wildlife trade. In some cases, drugs are smuggled alongside – or even inside – animals (Rosenberg). As the war on drugs prompts the forced movement of some animals across borders, the movements of others are restricted or blocked. Border fences and walls interrupt the migration, feeding and mating patterns of numerous species of insects and mammals, including jaguars (Peters et al.).

These policies do meet with some resistance. In her study of the Mexican-US borderlands, Juanita Sundberg notes that human patrols along parts of the border are hindered by American federal government legislation protecting the habitats of endangered species, including the small wild felines species ocelot and jaguarundi (331). The cats are not therefore merely victims of strict border controls aimed at people, she suggests, but – like the river and desert that also traverse the geographical limit between the two countries – actually ‘inflect,

disrupt, and obstruct the daily practices of boundary enforcement' (318). On the Mexican side of the border there is evidence that national and international conservation efforts have helped to increase the number of jaguars over the past decade ('Mexico Jaguar Population').

These examples serve as reminders that animals may exercise a degree of agency in the face of human attempts to restrict their movements or destroy their habitats, especially with the support of human beings working on behalf of endangered species. But as important as it is to recognise animal agency, and as valuable as conservationist efforts can be in the protection of certain species, the cases of the wild cats also highlight the human hierarchisation of other-than-human animals. While some species may be afforded a degree of protection from the worst effects of the war on drugs, others suffer its impact away from the attention of Western environmentalist organisations. The story of a child living in a Colombian rural community in the Amazon basin underscores this disparity:

Most people don't want to grow coca, but they feel like they have no other option. (...) The planes often sprayed our community. (...) They say they are trying to kill the coca, but they kill everything. (...) The fumigation planes sprayed our coca and food crops. All of our crops died. Sometimes even farm animals died as well. After the fumigation, we'd go days without eating. Once the fumigation spray hit my little brother and me. (...) I was sick for a long time and my brother was sick even longer (Hunter-Bowman 18).

If in the West the war on drugs pits the value and needs of endangered species against those of younger human beings (in the words of one politician, '(A)s concerned as we are about endangered species of animals, we are even more concerned about an endangered generation of children in America' [cited in Sundberg 330]), the account of military planes simultaneously poisoning farm animals and Colombian children in their campaigns against coca plants indicates that the rhetoric and practice of the war on drugs divides both animals and children into populations considered worthy of protection, on one hand, and expendable, on the other.

## The war on drugs as a war on animals

Scientists sometimes refer to the negative environmental impacts of national security and drugs law on animals and ecosystems as ‘unintended’ (McSweeney et al. 490; Peters et al. 740). This interpretation echoes the rhetoric of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, which refers to the staggering human, economic and environmental costs of contemporary international drug policy as ‘unintended consequences’ (Rolles et al., *Alternative World Drug Report*, 10). Critics of the war on drugs challenge the logic of ‘unintended consequences’, pointing out that prohibitionist policies continue to thrive despite extensive evidence of these consequences, suggesting that, at the very least, they are highly predictable (Rolles et al., *Alternative World Drug Report*, 10). Some go further, arguing that the war on drugs constitutes a war on people (Rolles et al., *The War on Drugs 2*).

If the violence caused to children and other vulnerable people by the war on drugs is increasingly recognised as predictable and therefore not merely ‘unintended’, I believe we can extend this claim to other animals as well. Just as children do not need to be the stated target of prohibitionist policy in order to be its victims, animals are often casualties of the war on drugs even if they are rarely represented in prohibitionist rhetoric. Following the work of Dinesh Wadiwel, I suggest that we recognise prohibitionist policies as an example of human activity that, while not necessarily a declared war against animals, causes ‘mass-scale injury and death’ towards animals in a way that is both ‘both systematic and directed’ and can therefore be understood as a form of war (7). In other words, the war on drugs is a war on animals.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> The War on Drugs (in upper case) refers to the specific United States policy, initiated in 1971 under President Richard Nixon. I use the term ‘illegal drugs’ for simplicity’s sake, although it is misleading. Under prohibitionist legislation it is the production, trade and possession of drugs that is illegal rather than the substances themselves.



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