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From: jimsandersonswccf@gmail.com

To: tadeu4@yahoo.com

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Buying land is not enough; we must work with people

Jim Sanderson

Nearly thirty years have passed since Kent H. Redford published his famous article titled *The Empty Forest* in the popular journal *BioScience*. In 1992, Redford was the director of the Program for Studies in Tropical Conservation and an associate professor in the Center for Latin American Studies and Department of Wildlife and Range Science (WRS), University of Florida, Gainesville. WRS would later become Wildlife Ecology and Conservation (WEC) that many of my colleagues and I attended. *The Empty Forest's* subtitle told us what we needed to know: many large animals are already ecologically extinct in vast areas of Neotropical forest where the vegetation still appears intact.

The world conservation community, Redford wrote, has focused much of its attention on the plight of tropical forests. Many authors have lamented the loss of forest cover and the destruction of the forest and speculated on the extent of the tropical forest left intact. Throughout the discussion, tall, majestic, tropical trees are used as a symbol for the complete set of animal and plant species found in tropical forests. Trees are also being used by some conservation biologists, park planners, and others to represent the entire tropical forest biota and as a measure of conservation worth.

The presence of soaring, buttressed tropical trees, however, does not guarantee the presence of resident fauna. Often trees remain in a forest that human activities have emptied of many of its large animals. The absence of these animals has profound implications, one of which is that a forest can be destroyed by humans from within as well as from without.

Redford discussed at length what was happening in the Amazon but his conclusions applied globally. Many large animals, he wrote, have already gone ecologically extinct in vast areas of Neotropical forest - areas with large, towering tropical trees, lush ferns, and beautiful orchids. We must not let a forest full of trees fool us into believing that all is well. Many of these forests are "living dead", and, although satellites passing overhead may reassuringly register them as forest, they are empty of much of the faunal richness valued by humans. An empty forest is a doomed forest.

It's clear that buying forests does not confer protection. To prevent empty forests and to restore the wildlife that belongs there, we must work with people living in and around forests. Their help is needed to save small wild cats and all other wildlife. In the final analysis, conservation is a social science.



Brazil's second wild cat hotspot: Mirador State Park - Tadeu de Oliveira, Tiger Cats Conservation Initiative

Readers will recall that Brazil's land area exceeds that of the continental United States. Mirador State Park is located in Maranhao State, NE Brazil. At about 1M acres, Mirador (as well as it adjacent areas) is Brazil's second, but no less important, small cat hot spot

where important populations of Jaguarundi, Margay, Ocelot, Pampas cat, and Northern tiger cat occur. The presence of Jaguar and Puma create "The Mirador 7."

Tadeu has worked in Mirador for over a decade and was formerly the park administrator. Tadeu leads the Tiger Cats Conservation Initiative. He has photographed all five small cats. What's remarkable is that multiple small cat species co-occur in what appears to be poor quality habitat. Imagine a thick sand substrate with stunted trees whose thick bark shows fire is a common occurrence. What's even more remarkable is that the Northern tiger cat has become the flagship species that is not only integrating local resident and private landowners into project activities, but has also caught the attention of government authorities. Conservation actions benefiting the small cats has brought an improvement in the harsh and extremely poor living conditions of the local community - community-based conservation at its best.

Tadeu's project in Mirador State Park stands out not only because the area has all seven wild cats, but also because it holds the single-most important populations of both the Northern tiger cat (*Leopardus tigrinus*) and the Brazilian Pampas cat (*Leopardus braccatus*) throughout [South America](#). The Northern tiger cat's population at Mirador was shown to be self-sustaining, if and only, we mitigate the disease threat from feral dogs, an astoundingly 80% of which recently tested positive for the deadly and dreadful canine distemper virus that has seriously harmed Lions in the Serengeti. No other protected area holds such large self-sustaining populations that must be properly managed and protected. Tadeu has already launched a successful feral dog neutering, vaccination, and relocation campaign. Now this campaign must be sustained.

[Tiger Cats Conservation Initiative](#)



First meeting of the African Golden Cat Conservation Alliance - Badru Mugerwa

The first meeting of the African Golden Cat Conservation Alliance (AGCCA) was held in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, Uganda, in December 2021. The meeting was organized by Badru Mugerwa and his team at Embaka—a registered community-based

conservation organization in Uganda engaging local communities to stop poaching. The Institute of Tropical Forest Conservation and the Uganda Wildlife Authority hosted the meeting, and the Small Wild Cat Conservation Foundation (SWCCF) and the Wildlife Conservation Network (WCN) provided financial support.

AGCCA is a species range-wide consortium for African golden cat (*Caracal aurata*) conservationists across the African continent. The vision of AGCCA is to extend conservation actions for the African golden cat across the species' entire range of 21 countries, involving like-minded and dedicated African conservationists and their local communities. The 18 AGCCA partners (and still counting) harness their common interests in conservation and local livelihood improvement of local communities to ensure the conservation of the African golden cat in 15 countries (Angola, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Nigeria, Republic of Congo, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, Togo and Uganda). Efforts in Burundi, Central African Republic, Guinea Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia will be added soon. They are united to address human activities threatening the long-term survival of the African golden cat across its range, while being cognizant of the key livelihood drivers behind these threats. They are also aware that it is through organization and togetherness as a group that they can achieve the conservation of the African golden cat and the development of their local communities.

After nine months of regular monthly zoom meetings, AGCCA had its first in-person meeting with 10 partners from eight range countries who gathered to discuss the conservation of the African golden cat. They shared their conservation experiences, discussed local threats to the African golden cat, and locally appropriate threat reduction strategies. The meeting participants also visited the community-based conservation (threat reduction) activities implemented by Embaka around Bwindi to see how these could be effectively implemented in their countries. The idea behind this meeting was to bring all AGCCA partners together to learn from each other, witness ongoing conservation activities and be inspired to strengthen threat reduction actions in their respective countries. Improving the livelihoods of local people is the key to conservation success. We can this Trust-based conservation.

[Embaka](#)





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