



Episode 122: Beyond Borders – Jaguar Recovery In The United States

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[Rewilding Earth Podcast](#)

Randy Young Villegas

Randy: [00:00:00] Many years ago, I had actually designed water tanks that are walls that hold water.

So concrete cisterns that are actual walls of a house or the landscape or whatever. And I did a Kickstarter campaign for that. And I did not get enough funding together to be able to do the second round of engineering with the tanks were engineered, but the form work was the next step.

And so when I didn't get that funding, I was looking for what was going to be next. I couldn't move on without it on my own. So I was looking for what was going to be next, but I didn't want a job. I needed to, in some way, be making a difference and improving our world. I just felt so much like the devastation all around me was unbearable.

And I was doing work as an outdoor guide and got invited to I got told about a mountain bike trip down on the Jaguar reserve. And so of course I immediately perked up. I'm fully bilingual. My mom's from Mexico. So it was in Mexico. First of all, that was the first big deal.

But the writing in a place that's that remote and that much wilderness and is, [00:01:00] jaguars there was just a overwhelmingly beautiful idea. And so I immediately asked if I could go along and they got ahold of someone and came back to me and said, yeah, you can go. And they're looking for a reserve manager.

And I said, awesome. If I meet any Jaguar reserve managers, I'll let you know. Cause I wouldn't have just assumed to check that box, but I came down and we spent a week mountain biking on the reserve. And after that week, it was, it became very clear that my skills and their needs actually did align completely.

They already had the biologist. They already had the cowboys on the ground doing a lot of the restoration work. A lot of that stuff was there but all the different things that I had accumulated the knowledge in order to mostly create my own homestead and you know live in harmony with nature on my own scale were completely valuable and completely what they needed and my ability to work with people and work with government and my teaching abilities and my bilingual capabilities, all of that [00:02:00] all lined up into this, into what they needed for this job.

And so by the end of the week, we got back to Tucson. And on a Sunday night about midnight, and on Monday morning about 930, I get a call saying that a couple board members want to have a meeting with me. And so by the end of lunch, the day after I get back from the Jaguar Reserve, we're saying on their side we need to figure out what you need to get paid and write you a job description.

And I'm like, I got to sell almost everything I own. And so I wound up coming down and managing a Jaguar Reserve for three and a half years. And it was a beautiful, hard spooky in a lot of ways job to have very much, something that I grew into and grew to love and did a lot of different things with it with meeting more with the local government, actually living in the town full time and getting to know the people and being there for people to cuss out about cattle losses and all the different things to be able to really understand the problem.

And [00:03:00] also did some great artwork around town, a bunch of murals around the community. And when you're painting a mural, you're out there for a week at a time, exposed to the sun and to the public for both criticisms and praise and just getting to know people. And after about three and a half years of that, I really started feeling the need to work more with the communities.

The Jaguar Reserve, the, I had done some training with the cowboys out there and we had switched biologists and had biologists that didn't need me to stick my hand in their work at all anymore, and everything was going really well there, and so I was feeling the need to do more with the communities and to begin with, I tried to modify the job to what I wanted to do, or what I felt was needed, and that didn't work out so well, so I wound up creating my own non profit, which is La Tierra del Caguar, La In order to start to really work more with those communities.

And I started it just in time to go right into COVID. And so the first two years as a nonprofit, we weren't [00:04:00] really able to do much of anything in the way of work with the communities or for fundraising or for anything. So it was two years of almost all planning and then hit the ground running as soon as restrictions were lifted and all that kind of stuff.

And so the idea with what we're doing is working much more with the landowners, with folks on helping them to partner with nature. Generally speaking in agriculture and in gardening and in ranching. When you see something on your land quite often the saying is, what is that and how do I kill it?

Which is not, of course, beneficial to nature in any way

for so many years now, we've destroyed the bonds with the ecosystem. That now the ecosystem sees our, sees us as a danger. And we see the ecosystem as a danger. And if you think about it, a monoculture of any type, even if it's cattle, if it, whatever it may be a certain type of grass, a certain, a food product, even if you're planting all of one type of thing, it [00:05:00] basically is a plague.

In that area, it's like a cancer in that plot of land. So nature is literally trying to fight you and take back that land. It is trying to make those places be productive as an ecosystem and not as a monoculture. Yeah. And that's one of the things I often explain to folks is that any monoculture is a plague.

By definition, it's a problem in that ecosystem. It's taking and not giving anything back. And so helping people to create ecosystems and to partner with their ecosystems makes it to where nature has a role again, and we do a lot of different teaching where we talk about, if you've got rodent problems, you don't have a rodent problem, you've got a lack of owls.

If you've got, slugs in the garden, you don't have slugs in the, you don't have a problem with slugs, you have food for ducks or turkeys. Re looking at those things and in permaculture, it's always said that the problem is the solution. If you're having trouble with something, it's figuring out, what feeds off it.

What [00:06:00] does it what resources can it provide for me? How can I work with this element in the system as opposed to seeing everything as a negative in your, Ecosystem. So that's a lot of what we're doing is partnering with nature in a lot of different ways through regenerative agriculture systems and natural building systems.

Jack: How often does the Jaguar conversation start up? Mike, how do you go from ducks and slugs? To and turkeys to because that's easier. That sounds like an easy conversation to have. And if somebody is moderately open to doing something different I could use some ducks and turkeys.

We could make more money or have more food or whatever. And we got free food here, but that's a long way away from talking to them about

Randy: jaguars. It is, but it's always in the conversation. Our graphics on the food pyramid in our area. We talk about everything starts with the soil.

You've got to have good soil microorganisms to have good, whether it's crops or pastures, either side of things to have healthy [00:07:00] herbivores. You have to have quality that. And then we go into the, to the predators as the upper ends of that chain. And so it's always in the conversation. But the thing is that when people start partnering with nature and realizing the different parts of those connections and the value of the ecosystem as a whole, it really starts to change the whole chip about how you think about things.

It's, it now becomes not looking at things as individual elements, but as groupings. And so that's where that comes in because really hitting people head on with the Jaguar is a difficult one for anyone to do. It's the reality there is that, people have been, it's been ingrained in us as humans through our culture and our fears.

To, fear the wolf Little Red Riding Hood all these different stories of, the three bears and the wolf like, all these different things are all about, fearing those predators. And so that's been ingrained into us in a very big way. So

we're really working [00:08:00] at creating the benefits and having it, having coexistence be the goal and not trying to diminish depredation, if that makes sense.

Yeah. And part of what we do go into with that is that when you diversify your income streams, then, a little bit of loss to any side isn't as big of a hit. And I describe it a lot as in with if a hailstorm comes through and it takes out one of your crops, if you've got multiple crops going that are going to give in different times, then that isn't devastating to your year's income.

But yeah, the jump to Jaguars is. Is always there and it's always there in our information, but it's not the part that we work daily on. It's more of a result than the focus. It's like you want to harvest water. You don't try to drag over a cloud. You dig, retention basins and stuff to capture that water when it comes by.

So it's really it's about dealing with the whole thing. Ecosystem when [00:09:00] you've got, we make it clear to people that when they've got the prey species that the Jaguar prefers, he's not going to go for their cattle in the same way. And when you're working with regenerative agriculture, you're rotating your cattle, you have areas of your land that don't have cattle on them.

And that those areas do have some deer on it. They do have some rabbits on it. They have other herbivores in those spaces during that timeframe. And those are going to feed the Jaguar instead of your cattle feeding them. But also, when your cattle are grouped and moving as a grouping, then they have a herd mentality and they defend their young.

The other cows actually become nannies for the one that's having a calf right now, or just had a calf. And when you're working with regenerative systems, that side of things just starts to work on itself in a lot of ways. Because you're there more often, you're moving the cattle from paddock to paddock, and that, that creates, the human movement, the cattle being grouped.

All these things also create less depredation. [00:10:00] So, a lot of people want to come at things very much with an attitude of you shouldn't be doing that. These are important. And I think it's much better to be like, if you do these things, it'll go better for you. That's a more valuable way of going about things because people don't respond well to being scolded or told they're doing things wrong

Jack: is a 180 degrees opposite of people who have in policy discussions around jaguars like reintroductions and populations one day again existing in the United States permanently and turtle southern and I talked a lot more on that end. This is something, I think we need everything but this is really neat

Randy: yeah, it is a very different take on it. And, working with people's financial systems as a financial incentives.

For creating the changes as opposed to, you're going to have to start doing this because of this legislation, it changes the whole parameters of thing. And when you start talking to people about how, having really diverse forage [00:11:00] is going to make their cattle much healthier and much less likely to have any illnesses, much sturdier, much, healthier and more productive throughout the year, then that makes for that, that, that biodiversity that you're wanting them to create in their paddocks and that kind of stuff, which helps all the different trophic layers, when you do that you're looking at the win side, right?

Instead of, like I said, the scolding side, so each of these different types of regenerative systems when done properly. Partner with nature. You start to think about if you're farming, for instance, and you, one of the things that's real common is called biological controls of plagues or insect pests, and the base concept is if you're going to have this bug come into your field, you can buy this other bug that will take care of it.

For instance, ladybugs with aphids, right? And so farmers, indoor gardeners, whatever it may be can offset those things in those ways. But if you have a diversity of flowers planted around your fields or in certain stripes in your [00:12:00] fields, then you're attracting the natural predators and the natural pollinators and all those things from your region.

And you don't have to be importing those controls, which are, used instead of chemical pesticides and stuff like that. They're a great step on the way while you don't have the other systems developed. But once you have these systems well developed your, pest control and all that stuff is built into the system.

And if you're not having a monoculture, you're not having a plague grow as big in your crops anyway. And so all of these different layers of doing things properly partner with nature and strengthen your system at the same time. And that's where the magic happens that can make large scale change happen.

Because, as long as we're talking about. You know what lands we can buy or which people we can convince to do it because they feel shamed into doing it or they feel like, they have an actual value of nature and appreciation of nature. We're [00:13:00] talking about a very small percentage that we can affect at a time when we talk about systems that are going to strengthen your economy, strengthen your land, strengthen your long term legacy for your family and for your own well being.

Now we're talking about things or people are willing to adopt at a much larger scale.

Jack: It's got to be a real shock to a landowner to just go and just hear somebody asking questions about them and you're offering help and support. For what they're already doing what they're already facing, and it's got to be like, wow, this guy, I, he has some funny ideas about carnivores and I'm worried about depredation, but I'm willing to talk to him because. He actually cares

Randy: yeah, exactly. And I make sure to talk a lot with folks about, your great grandpa, great grandfather. Worked with nature, he things were still on a smaller scale. He didn't have the heavy equipment He didn't have all those things and he was planting in between [00:14:00] things and those things were providing him a lot of the services That you're now having to purchase and, that takes it back to, more of a the last couple generations have been snookered into systems that aren't as productive as they sounded instead of you guys have always done it wrong, it's that's an important link back to prior times is key as well.

I think in that. And and yeah, definitely, being focused on them being more productive. Not on what you're going to have to lower your number of cattle and you're going to have to, stop using the water and all these kinds of things. And, we definitely want exclusion zones around the rivers for cattle not to be getting into the rivers, but we want to create the watering troughs in the right spot for them to be able to get to where they're good feed is and have all that be able to boom, so the systems are viewed in a different way instead of.

It being, changes made for nature, they're changes made for the landowner that [00:15:00] benefit nature. Yeah. And that's, I think where real change can happen because you meet a lot of resistance whenever you

start telling people like we said that they're wrong and trying to avoid that resistance and go with the flow of creating more opportunities is really huge and to be able to do a lot of it.

You have to figure out systems that work in the place you're in, right? Like Agroforestry systems was one of the one of the big pushes to be able to partner with nature, but I was actually having trouble figuring out systems that would be productive enough for people to be willing to take them on in these regions.

And and I came across the agave mesquite combinations in agroforestry, along with other plants, but those two having a lot of power as a silage for cattle people here. In the area we're in, Bacanora, which is a tequila, a different agave distillate, like a tequila is now a legal form in the area, and people are really wanting to plant in a lot of agave.

And I'm scared of a lot of [00:16:00] that being done in monoculture ways. I'm also scared of the landscape continued to being, to be, raped of all its native agaves. And working with people to create agroforestry systems with agave and showing the benefits of those and the detriments of doing it in monoculture is a big way to get that wave of change that's happening towards those plantations to happen in ways that are more beneficial to nature and to everyone.

So finding that system, I think, was key because. Things that are native to your region, first off, they benefit nature a lot more, but they're also not going to require as much of your input, as much of your watering, as much of anything like that. So they make systems that are much hardier, much stronger, and much more capable of functioning for people and really being able to improve their finances.

Jack: You say on your website, agave and mesquite agroforestry is a key to restoring the land of the jaguar. On the ecological side of it, say that you [00:17:00] have and on this page, you're meeting with some locals, some ranchers and people say that part worked, and they're leaning in, and they're interested in not doing monocultures and but still seeing this as an opportunity, and Working in partnership with you.

And so we have that. How is that restoring the land of the Jaguar? Ecologically?

Randy: What does it mean? A lot of it is when you go in to do more intensive plantings with, these agroforestry systems, you're quite often reshaping that land. And so you are creating water retention systems. You're cutting out a lot of the erosion. And a lot of those kinds of things. And so those lands start to be able to be much stronger. And if you're on a larger scale piece of land, with it being an agroforestry system, you're not just dotted agaves everywhere.

Like you're going to have, it's going to be very much looking like a natural area from the region here, but with lots of plants that are valuable for medicinal purposes for. Their ecosystem services that they provide within the system [00:18:00] like helping to provide nitrogen or helping to make phosphorus more available in the soil.

Different plants have different relationships with the micro bacterias and funguses in the soil to be able to do those things. And so these abilities to create those systems and create those water retentions and all of that are a very big key to making a change because getting people to do large scale at restoration work to start improving their rangelands and stuff, it's really difficult to get people to go out there and dig a bunch of berms and a bunch of swales and, lines on contour and stuff like that.

But if you're going to plant agaves along that line on contour, all of a sudden it has much more value to do that. And so people who never would have done work to restore their land are much more likely to do it because they're planting in these cash crops, let's say in those areas, but by those being native and native adapted plants.

They are benefiting the rest of the ecosystem in the region. Those pollinators, those predator species, all of those are having those things to work on. And, [00:19:00] as that goes up the chain and you have that biodiversity of plants going into those herbivores, you've got healthier food for the jaguar, because when the majority of the lands here, when they do any improvements on large scale rangeland.

They're still planting in buffel grass here, which is a invasive grass that was brought in from Africa at some point because you basically can't kill it. But at the times that they use it for the cattle, it has almost no feed value. It's almost all just like fill. And so that is the main way that things are done and it creates much more erosion because they just over plow, overgraze it again and it ends up bare and all that water running through and just creating massive erosion.

So creating these systems that people are willing to buy into and are willing to implement is really key to getting those lands to be done in different ways. And that's the big step. There is getting people to work on restoring their lands and to think about [00:20:00] biodiversity. And those are those systems that we're teaching is that if you have a biodiverse system, you've got more outputs with much less inputs.

Once the system is established, the system starts to work for itself. I explained to people all the time. Like you don't go to a native forest And see anybody like applying nitrogen, nobody's putting fertilizer on it. Nobody's having to weed it, it functions as an ecosystem and the same can happen on your plantation on your planting.

Jack: You guys are even into natural building, natural construction, and some of this looks familiar, but other parts of it almost looks like you're printing with Adobe.

Is that what I'm seeing here?

Randy: It does look like it. It's called Hyper Adobe and you're basically making big Adobe sausages and then compressing them with the tamper and tamping the sides. And so it is very similar, but it is somewhat faster. And each brick is the whole length of the wall.

And so that gives it that strength. Of being [00:21:00] tied in with each other instead of just joined at the joints, and just by the mortar and when you lay it, when you lay a set, it goes on top of the prior one and it goes on moist. And so as it's drying, it's moistening the other one and they're sticking to each other.

And so they're they're automatically bonded the one brick to the one before it. So that's called hyper Adobe and it's a pretty powerful system and helping people to appreciate the old building techniques with some of the modern technological advancements that can be used with them.

Is really a big deal to me too, because, energy is always a thing, right? Like we're saving the Jaguar is also, the environment, right? If we don't have, healthy skies and healthy waters, then there's not much point in having a Jaguar. They're trying to breathe, right?

So working with these natural building techniques, you end up with buildings that are much more efficient, long term, much more comfortable, also long term. And you can build with the land with the dirt [00:22:00] right from your site. Okay. And so that's really empowering and means that, concrete isn't being, all of the extreme carbon footprint of concrete and then transporting it hours and hours to be able to get to the town here to be able to start doing a concrete project.

Those things have a huge carbon footprint, but it's also another way for people to see this appreciation for old. Techniques with a modern twist which is what a lot of this agroforestry and permaculture and stuff is where we're embracing indigenous techniques with the scientific backing and modifications that have come from being able to study them in different ways.

People actually really love it.

So there's a really big thing where the past in a lot of ways was beaten out of people, like the modern is better. The, those indigenous things here in Mexico, just like in the States, the word native was a bad word for a long time and is still here.

The recuperation rate is lower than it [00:23:00] is in the US on that. And so those indigenous techniques and those old school ways of building and all those kinds of things are often looked down upon. And so that's a big part of it is embracing those things and doing them to a level that makes it to where it's wow that's magical, right?

And that, that changes minds that, that makes people really be able to to see the value in what was, you could probably

Jack: find some instances in your memory where people feel a little refreshed because they could tell in that moment when provided an alternative, which was something that was done before a moment of relief.

Because I feel like the people that I've met over the years couldn't put their finger on why they weren't just happier. In terms of how they were living or the things that they were using to live to farm to build to, but I feel like at some of these get togethers that you have. And these projects that you're doing, it feels like a [00:24:00] light must go on with people, like this isn't better for all the obvious reasons, it's also better because it just feels right.

It feels like what we ought to be doing, how we ought to be living, it's historic. There might even be some sort of a genetic memory of that, because that's the way we live for far longer than we have the way people are generally living today.

Randy: And that's definitely true, actually, my partner Allison when we're doing different workshops and stuff, she stands at the back of the room and watches people's heads, and she'll tell me at the end, the people who.

Identified most and we're nodding their heads the most and stuff and quite often they are the people who still have the most links to their past and to their indigenous nature and that kind of stuff. So I think that's definitely a reality. And I think that, when you're doing this kind of work playing with mud, it takes you back to your childhood, but I think it does take you back to that in the primary brain to, generations and generations of doing it.

I [00:25:00] actually, I'm a clay sculptor as well. And so I've always had that appreciation for what it feels like when you put your hands into the mud and start to work, and it definitely, anytime you teach somebody to do it, whether it's earthen wall or a clay sculpture, it definitely does, bring back both of those, the childhood and the, primal.

Jack: I'm nodding because natural result of all this work that you're doing is that Jaguars are going to have better places to be, to move, and people have become closer to nature, the way we used to be, and it, the resistance to it would be defeated by everybody already having a better living situation, an economic situation, and everything being a lot more land based and natural.

I don't think that at the end of that, people would be even bat an eye when they would find out that there's a jaguar pair living nearby. Just [00:26:00] because the that connection was restored and it's weird because we have these individual campaigns. It's like we got to save the Jaguar.

We got to save the wolves. We got to do this for wolves and we got to do this for Jaguar and everybody else is saying, Oh, I live here. I'm a little I have my hand up. And then if we're, smacking their hands down and we're just saying that forget it, this is going to be a law, you're going to have to do it.

There is a time and place for that, perhaps, and probably in the United States that's the only thing you can, maybe somebody could argue to get people to respond. We have these rugged individualists here who already spray all the weeds away. They already have the money and the everything else and they're trying to protect that kind of fiefdom the technology the Misguided disconnect from nature and everything else.

Randy: We've got those rugged individualists here too. And it's, but we're part of what we're doing is right now we're putting together a group of 20. Producers in the area to work with more [00:27:00] directly. We're going to be working to begin with on a small piece of land about five acres per person in order to do a a guy, the Mesquite agroforestry systems.

But the idea is that those are from many different communities throughout the watershed here, those different individuals. So each of their pieces of land and their minds become a. Virtual classroom for people to see the systems actually functioning and they become like ambassadors for it in each of their respective neighborhoods.

And it's biting away at the pieces you can actually an interesting thing here is that a lot of the people who go to the United States for work. Are actually going to go, legally, illegally, however, that may be the vast majority of them go to work on the petroleum pipelines.

And so they actually get fully indoctrinated into, rolling coal and, the environment is here for us to use up and all those types of mentalities. So we, we definitely have those folks here, but we don't clash with people. [00:28:00] We live here full time first off for I've been living here for about nine years now.

And so You know an actual part of the community actually see me working know that i'm you know Who I am and that I really represent and walk the walk that i'm talking and those things make a big difference Getting those seeds in each of those communities like each of those places is like its own seed right and once that

property starts to flower It's going to seed the properties around it and with the agave and mesquite, you very literally are because the agave in the third year gives a whole bunch of it pops off of its root system.

And so if you start by planting in two hectares or five acres, we'll say. Then, in three years, you can plant in probably another five hectares, what is that? 10 acres. And so it keeps multiplying out because of those equals that you have from, because the system itself, the bounty that it creates.

You very much are creating those like [00:29:00] seeds in the communities in order to change those lines little by little of their neighbors. We have people come up to us and tell us that, we kill Jaguars on our land when they come onto our ranch.

And we don't, try to figure out how to turn them in. We figure out how to talk to them because if we turn in one of those people, we'll no longer get that information from anyone in the community anymore. It's one of those things that some people would be like, what do you mean you're not reporting it?

And it's well, they're still going to do it. And the other people who are doing it are going to do it. That is until we change their mindsets and we don't even have access to their mindsets if we become their enemies. And trust me, I definitely want to lash out and want to do whatever, whenever I hear about those things, but I have to look at the longer ball game and figure out how to work with folks and.

Sometimes those kinds of things are overwhelming, but they're, they are part of what happens here, and to think that it's not happening because no one will tell me about it. Is like thinking you're [00:30:00] winning and not restructuring your plan,

Jack: how can people who are inspired by the work you're doing and want it to see it expand as much as possible?

How can

Randy: people help? We're at La Tierra del Jaguar. It's also the land of the Jaguar. org will also get you to our website. And so that's the immediate way to be able to find us there. You can also email us on there sign up for our newsletter and hear more about what we're doing.

And definitely if anyone's interested in coming down and checking out what we're doing, definitely let us know. And we are very open to collaborations and working with people who are possibly, wanting to do their thesis or anything like that. We're open to all those types of situations researchers that want to do work or come down and see what we're doing and just the general public.

We're we are in a very remote corner of Sonora, Mexico. And company is always a beautiful thing and being able to have somebody reach out and communicate with people about what we're doing and, answer any [00:31:00] questions because maybe some folks think that they have great ideas for us that, if we did it a different way, it would be better.

And I'm completely open to that. I definitely don't think I know at all. We've got what we're doing and we've got a lot that we want to do as we continue to grow. We're still a tiny nonprofit. We'll have a full time biologist in the fall. And as well as the two of us and our our day workers on the ground.

We're moving forward in a very big way and definitely get a hold of us and see what we can do together. I

Jack: expect some updates in the future, so you're more than welcome to come back to the podcast and let us know how things are going. We're as, we just started working with Turtle Southern at the Rewilding Institute and Jaguar.

I really think it's going to be the year of the Jaguar at the Rewilding Institute because it incorporates a lot of our programs, the Mogollon Rim, the Mogollon Wildway. The Lobo trail and all of our connections that we're continuing to develop between the United States and northern Mexico. And this is just really [00:32:00] exciting.

So we're going to want to stay in touch. Thank you so much, Randy, for taking the time to be with us today.

Randy: Thank you again for the invitation and thank you all for listening.