

Tapirus pinchaque in Southwestern Ecuador

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Few large Neotropical mammals have a distribution range as restricted as the Andean tapir (*Tapirus pinchaque*). This species inhabits montane forests and *paramos* in the Andes of Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, between 1500 and 4800 masl (Hershkovitz, 1954; Lizcano *et al.*, 2002; Ortega-Andrade *et al.*, 2015; Lizcano *et al.*, 2016). In Ecuador, the Andean tapir lives mainly in the eastern side of the Andes mountains (Schauenberg, 1969; Downer, 1990; Castellanos, 1994; Ortega-Andrade *et al.*, 2015); and a small satellite population inhabits the southwestern mountains, specifically in the Cajas National Park and its buffer zone (Castellanos *et al.* 2017; Sánchez-Karste & Fernández de Córdova 2018).

Historical records show that the Andean tapir had occupied the central zone of the western Andes in the surroundings of La Mana, Cotopaxi Province. A tapir's forelimb was collected in that locality in 1958, and it is currently in the Museum of the Escuela Politécnica Nacional, Quito - Ecuador. A-fragment of skin from that limb was analyzed by Ruiz-Garcia *et al.*, (2016), who verified that the specimen corresponded to *Tapirus pinchaque*.

Seemingly, the species distributed further south in Ecuador in the recent past. According to a note from the Ecuadorian newspaper El Universo published on April 15, 1978, a specimen was hunted in the locality of Pallatanga, Chimborazo Province; and a photo of the animal was also disclosed. Subsequently, Albuja (1983) published information on the existence of this species in Echandia, Los Ríos Province. Likewise, residents from Cubilli Chico

and La Industria, Province of Bolívar mention that this species was present until the 1980s (Sara Garofolo. pers. comm.). In 1990, the mammologist Jaime Guerra (pers. comm.) also reported *T. pinchaque* in a preliminary checklist of mammals found in Molleturo, Azuay Province.

In 2017, Patricio Aguilar photographed a specimen of *T. pinchaque* (Fig. 1) near his farm located in a seasonal forest (-3.69496°, -79.51343°, 1200 m asl) in San Antonio, Güizhagüiña parish, El Oro Province. This sighting widens the range of distribution of this species to southwestern Ecuador. Furthermore, we do not rule out the existence of these animals in northwestern Peru.



Figure 1. Andean tapir near the Guizhagüiña parish, El Oro, Ecuador. Photo by Patricio Aguilar.

The patches of forest in the Güizhagüiña parish where *Tapirus pinchaque* was reported, are surrounded by small roads and second-rate ballast roads; necessary for mining and livestock activity in the region. This confirms that the Andean tapir can inhabit, adapt, and coexist in places with high anthropogenic activities, as it has already been described by Castellanos (2019).

The historical and current distribution of the Andean tapir in western Ecuador, overlaps with non-scientific reports on the presence of *Tapirus bairdii* in that region. Moreover, there are no specific records of *Tapirus bairdii* in the region, and its presence is not supported by any evidence (Tirira *et al.* 2019); since the confusion of shape, weight and color of the two tapir species can be common, we infer that the reports from chronicles most likely corresponded to *Tapirus pinchaque*.

In February 2020, we carried out an expedition to the Cordillera de Chilla, El Oro province, looking for current records of *T. pinchaque*. We were informed that in 2019 two specimens were observed in two localities, one in Asigcho and the other in San Antonio (Andrés Mejía and Hernán Armijos, pers. com.). With this information we intend to capture, mark, and track some specimens with satellite devices, to understand their movements, preference and use of habitat, and to describe their biological corridors. These results would be used to provide strategies to local decision-makers to enhance the protection and conservation of forests remnants that still house endangered large mammals in these highly fragmented ecosystems.

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