

# A CUTTING

**M**ANY BRUSHED IT OFF AS madness that would never be put into action, but in late January, the new Trump administration for the United States of America announced that it will be moving forward with plans to build 'the wall' along the American southern border with Mexico. The wall presents human, fiscal, and international relations concerns, but will also have an adverse impact on the environment by slicing wildlife populations apart.

This is just part of a wave of policy and agenda shifts that are set to negatively impact the state of the environment on a national and global scale. Among them are a push for increased oil drilling, climate change denialism driving energy and environment priorities, and an anti-regulatory fervor that could lead to higher CO2 emissions and pollution from the manufacturing and coal industries. Trump's wall is just one of many policies that fly in the face of science and the environment.

Nature does not adhere to the human concept of borders: species are meant to cross landscapes and biomes to find food and mates. The US-Mexico region is a rich ecosystem, home to a diverse array of mammals,

birds, and plants. The Rio Grande Valley, for example, is one of the most biodiverse places in North America. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, an impregnable wall running across the entire 2,000-mile border between the two countries would potentially impact more than 111 endangered species, 108 migratory bird species, four wildlife refuges and fish hatcheries, and an unknown number of protected wetlands.

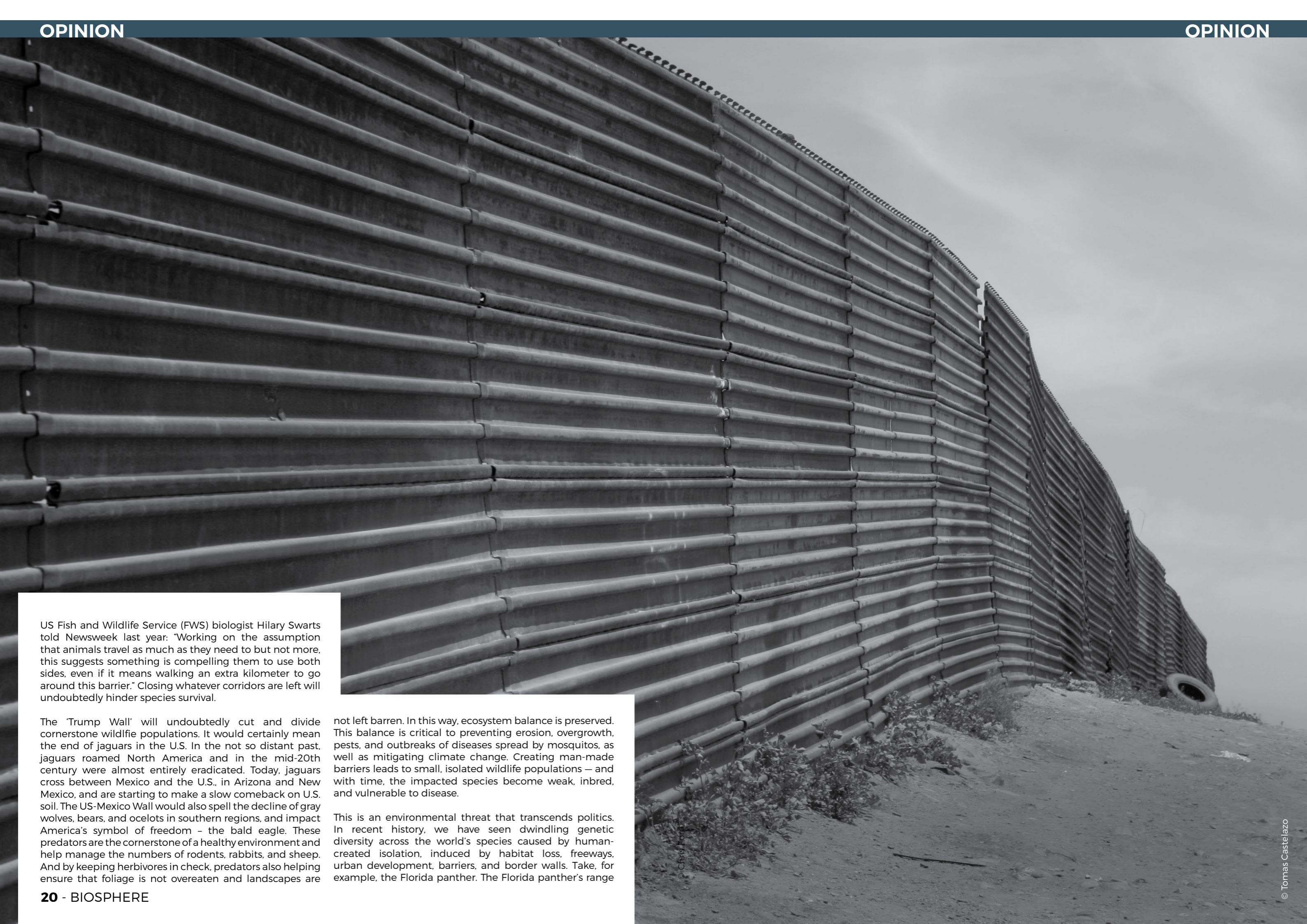
There are already a series of walls and fences extending from California to Texas, covering about 40% of the border between the U.S. and Mexico. These existing barriers are already having detrimental impact on wildlife, including the iconic roadrunner (*Geococcyx* spp.) of the southwest and big-horn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*). Being a land-loving bird, existing barriers are already causing roadrunner declines. Similarly, according to Dr Clint Epps, a wildlife biologist at Oregon State University, big-horn sheep "have decent populations on both sides of the border. But they depend on those movements for maintaining genetic diversity, for recolonising habitat where they've suffered local extinctions." Meanwhile, scientists have found that bobcats will walk great distances simply to find breaks in the border barrier where they can cross to the other side of their habitat. As

# DIVIDE



President Trump's proposed new wall will not only threaten people, but divide and destroy wildlife populations too, argues **Rina Herzl**.

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US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) biologist Hilary Swarts told Newsweek last year: "Working on the assumption that animals travel as much as they need to but not more, this suggests something is compelling them to use both sides, even if it means walking an extra kilometer to go around this barrier." Closing whatever corridors are left will undoubtedly hinder species survival.

The 'Trump Wall' will undoubtedly cut and divide cornerstone wildlife populations. It would certainly mean the end of jaguars in the U.S. In the not so distant past, jaguars roamed North America and in the mid-20th century were almost entirely eradicated. Today, jaguars cross between Mexico and the U.S., in Arizona and New Mexico, and are starting to make a slow comeback on U.S. soil. The US-Mexico Wall would also spell the decline of gray wolves, bears, and ocelots in southern regions, and impact America's symbol of freedom - the bald eagle. These predators are the cornerstone of a healthy environment and help manage the numbers of rodents, rabbits, and sheep. And by keeping herbivores in check, predators also helping ensure that foliage is not overateen and landscapes are

not left barren. In this way, ecosystem balance is preserved. This balance is critical to preventing erosion, overgrowth, pests, and outbreaks of diseases spread by mosquitos, as well as mitigating climate change. Creating man-made barriers leads to small, isolated wildlife populations – and with time, the impacted species become weak, inbred, and vulnerable to disease.

This is an environmental threat that transcends politics. In recent history, we have seen dwindling genetic diversity across the world's species caused by human-created isolation, induced by habitat loss, freeways, urban development, barriers, and border walls. Take, for example, the Florida panther. The Florida panther's range



once extended throughout the southeastern U.S., from Louisiana to Florida, but the subspecies is now limited to Florida's southern tip. Today, Florida panthers roam just 5% of their historic range and are cut off by freeways and urban development from accessing other panther populations. As nature requires genetic diversity in order to ensure healthy populations, in a scarce subspecies this ultimately leads to inbreeding and disease. Great efforts were made in the early 1990s to save the Florida panther from imminent extinction and panthers from Texas were brought in to genetically revive the dwindling, inbred population. For now, the effort saved the subspecies and today, there are fewer than 200 wild Florida panthers left.

In addition to laws like the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act, among others, moving forward on building an impenetrable border wall would normally appear to be a violation of the Endangered Species Act. The US Fish and Wildlife Service website states: "[T]he purpose of the ESA (Endangered Species Act) is to protect and recover imperiled species and the ecosystems upon which they depend." Under the Bush Administration, however, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) waived more than 30 environmental and cultural laws to allow the

building of border walls in the name of national security – despite the fact that the verifiable impact of enlarged border regulation on national security has been called into question by some groups.

The push for the wall is part of a systemic problem with the new administration, which has a deep disregard for science and does not seem to consider environmental impacts or respect human rights. Ecosystems gently flow into one another and do not stop at the sight of man-made lines and borders – landscapes on the US and Mexican sides of the border are one and the same, because neither nature nor animals distinguish between our countries' borders. Perhaps humans should take a cue from nature. Rather than etch deep, artificial divides that weaken our resilience, we should embrace similarities and draw strength from diversity.

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**"This is an environmental threat that transcends politics"**

Rina is dedicating her career toward solving global conservation issues and works as a consultant to environmental organizations, helping to advance their social and digital media presence and accelerate their impact strategy. Rina holds a MSc in Biodiversity, Conservation, and Management from the University of Oxford and a certificate in Social Impact Strategy from the University of Pennsylvania.

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