



Where I work Cristina Cuiabália Neves

Photographed for *Nature* by
Maria Magdalena Arréllaga.

Fires are the biggest challenge between June and October in Sesc Pantanal, a privately owned natural heritage reserve of 108,000 hectares in the state of Mato Grosso, Brazil. This year, in the first three months of the dry season, more than 50% of the land was damaged by flames, and the drier areas were burnt to the ground. It was the worst scenario in 20 years.

This picture was taken in August. I'm on top of a tanker truck leading the team of firefighters that work with me and the rest of the park-management staff during this season. We monitor more than 1,000 square kilometres of land, lakes, bays and rivers in this reserve, so we use motorcycles, tractors, boats and an aeroplane.

Around 700 species of animal live here. Among them are 12 endangered species, including the jaguar, the marsh deer and the giant anteater. Many are injured or killed by the fires. This year, even a jaguar, which is usually fast enough to escape, was burnt. It is now recovering at our facilities.

I was born in the city of Cuiabá, the state capital. My mother taught geography there

at the Federal University of Mato Grosso, and I used to go with her on field trips to Pantanal, a vast area of wetlands and grasslands that contains the nature reserve. I see it as a member of my family. When I did my PhD at the University of São Paulo in 2014, I knew I wanted to study how to control the main threats to Pantanal biodiversity: fishing, hunting, drug trafficking and fires.

Since its creation as a reserve in 1998, Sesc Pantanal has supported 65 research projects that help us to understand how we can nurture the fauna and flora that live there. Conservation has always been our main goal, but now we are also educating the community and our visitors. We know that most of our fires are started outside the reserve, to clear space for pastures. In Brazil, where there is much agriculture and cattle farming, we need to find sustainable ways to reduce the pressure on the land – and to make it less vulnerable to fires.

Cristina Cuiabália Neves is a biologist and manager at Sesc Pantanal in Mato Grosso, Brazil. **Interview by Patricia Maia Noronha.**