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Bolstering Threatened and Endangered Species Populations During the 50th Anniversary of the Endangered Species Act

National Wildlife Conservation Nonprofit Implements Strategic Conservation Actions to Protect ESA-Listed Amphibians and Reptiles Across the US

UNITED STATES, May 3, 2023 - As the Endangered Species Act (ESA) turns 50 years old this year, the public eye will be focused on the species it protects. However, some of the most Endangered species in the world, amphibians and reptiles, are often overlooked. The Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy (ARC), a national nonprofit to conserve imperiled wildlife, is actively using the framework provided by the act to protect these frequently misunderstood yet imperiled species across the country.

When considering the act's impact on Threatened and Endangered amphibians and reptiles in the last 50 years, examples like the remarkable recovery of the American alligator suggest a strong track record for the ESA. It's equally possible to criticize the act, however, when looking at cases like the Houston toad. The toad has experienced significant declines over the last fifty years despite being one of the earliest amphibians listed. It could be argued that the ESA has had major successes and major failures.

"In the two decades that I've been interacting with the ESA, I have come to have a different view of it altogether," said ARC Executive Director JJ Apodaca. "The Endangered Species Act hasn't failed all of those listed species that are barely hanging on. The conservation community has failed the ESA."

The ESA is powerful legislation that has helped save many amphibians and reptiles from extinction. However, as Apodaca explained, "We can't stand back and expect it to save the species we love on its own. Simply put, if we want to recover species, we can't expect the ESA to wave a magic wand. We have to jump in and help." ARC is doing just that for dozens of Threatened and Endangered species throughout the US.

One example is the frosted flatwoods salamander, a federally-listed Threatened amphibian that spends most of its days underground. They're little-studied, secretive salamanders that were once more widespread in the Southeast. Today, they are in danger of disappearing entirely from the landscape. Their populations have

plummeted due to habitat loss. Less than three percent of their preferred longleaf pine forest habitat remains. As a result, only a handful of populations are hanging on in Florida and two in Georgia.

ARC is restoring longleaf pine forests and wetlands in the frosted flatwoods salamander's range, focusing on removing invasive plant species and promoting historic fire regimes. The organization also surveys the forests of Georgia and Florida to monitor known salamander populations and locate any unknown remnant populations. Soon, ARC will be working with partners to start a comprehensive headstarting program to raise salamanders in captivity past their most vulnerable stages and release them into the wild.

Just west in Alabama, another federally-listed Threatened species, the flattened musk turtle, is found only in the Black Warrior River—and nowhere else in the world. It's tailor-made for its habitat, which is becoming more heavily developed and degraded; suitable conditions for these turtles are now quite limited. The main culprit is siltation from unsustainable forestry practices, agriculture, and mining. Also, a legacy of dams built in the area blocks the river flow and fragments the habitat.

Currently, ARC is conducting a large-scale environmental DNA and stream health survey. The organization's biologists sample and analyze water from several locations along the watershed to determine which species are present, looking especially for flattened musk turtles. Biologists also record threats such as dams and eroded banks in those areas. These efforts will give the organization's scientists a complete sense of where the turtles are and the problems they're facing in those areas. ARC will then use genetic sequencing to identify which populations are most vulnerable to inbreeding and focus on restoring connectivity to create larger, healthier populations.

Using strategic approaches like these, the rapid decline of imperiled species can be reversed. Innovative programs to support ESA recovery goals also provide hope for conserving all Threatened and Endangered amphibians and reptiles. And that, as Apodaca stated, "is the true legacy of the ESA, the promise that we can bring back the species we nearly lost."

About Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy (ARC)

Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy, or ARC, is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit focused on identifying and conserving the highest priority places for amphibians and reptiles in the United States. We protect endangered amphibians and reptiles through a strategic, scientific, and passionate approach. We believe the conservation of amphibians, reptiles, and the habitats they depend on is vitally important. To learn more, visit ARCProtects.org.

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