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While Endangered Species Act Protections Lag for Amphibians and Reptiles, Actions Are Underway to Conserve At-Risk, Unlisted Species

National Nonprofit Works on the Ground Across the US for Imperiled Species Denied Listing

UNITED STATES, March 27, 2024 - Despite amphibians and reptiles being two of the most at-risk vertebrate groups in the country, efforts to afford them protection under the US Endangered Species Act (ESA) are lagging. In fact, [research](#) has demonstrated that amphibians are the most underlisted species in the US, with more than 80% of vulnerable species remaining unlisted under the ESA. Reptiles are not faring much better. The Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy (ARC), a national nonprofit to conserve imperiled wildlife, is working on the ground to protect the most imperiled of these species, regardless of whether they have been listed.

Although 45 amphibian species and 120 reptile species have been listed for protection under the ESA, many more need the safeguards that listing them would provide. A large number of imperiled species are awaiting review or have been denied protection after review.

"The issue is that so many amphibians and reptiles are secretive and hard to find, which means that reliable data about the status of their populations are lacking," explained ARC Executive Director JJ Apodaca. "In most cases, we have no historical data on a population or species, and thus it's hard to know if they fit some of the ESA listing criteria, such as having experienced a rapid decline. Further, we have seen that many populations may only have a few individuals, meaning they're not viable long term. So, species that are in trouble end up appearing to be more stable than they likely actually are."

This has resulted in the denial of protections for species that scientists are deeply concerned about because of increasing uncommonness, from salamanders in Tennessee to frogs in California. The southern hognose snake, with its namesake upturned snout, in the Southeastern US is an example of one such species. These snakes have become increasingly rare, but collecting the evidence needed to list them, proving that there is an imminent threat to their survival, is time-consuming and difficult.

Southern hognoses live mostly underground and are notoriously challenging to locate and study. However, in 2019, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) stated that they're likely to remain viable into the foreseeable future, and they were denied listing. Last year, however, USFWS agreed to once again consider providing ESA status to these snakes, and a decision should be forthcoming by August 2025.

"Agency personnel are doing their best, but they're just understaffed and stretched thin because of limited funding. This means imperiled species often don't get the time and attention they deserve. Plain and simple," said Apodaca.

The result has been the same for most populations of the eastern hellbender in the Eastern US, the Berry Cave salamander in Tennessee, the Peaks of Otter salamander in Virginia, the Panamint alligator lizard and foothill yellow-legged frog in California, and several more at-risk amphibians and reptiles.

This is where ARC steps in. Without waiting for species to be listed, the organization implements strategic, targeted actions for the US's most imperiled amphibians and reptiles. As Apodaca said, "Even when a species has been listed, the ESA can't wave a magic wand. The efforts needed for these amphibians and reptiles are often beyond what federal programs can provide. The bottom line is that whether or not a species has federal status, we have to jump in and help if it's in trouble."

To this end, ARC is restoring longleaf pine forests throughout much of the range of the southern hognose. This is critical because their declines are the result of habitat loss. Less than three percent of their preferred longleaf pine forest habitat remains.

The organization also protects non-listed populations of eastern hellbenders in the fast-flowing streams and rivers they inhabit. They are threatened by development, which has caused siltation in these waters, filling in the spaces hellbenders use between rocks and increasing the temperature of the water. ARC's biologists work with public and private landowners to restore watersheds by fencing cattle out of hellbender habitat. Plus, they install large slabs of rock, which the salamanders need for breeding and nesting.

Using strategic approaches like these, the declines of at-risk species can be halted and reversed. And every individual in the populations of rare species is essential. As Apodaca stated, "Not only is their genetic diversity the key to healthy populations in the future, it's irreplaceable. Once it's gone, it's gone. But we won't let that happen on our watch."

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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