



Common Chuckwalla (*Sauromalus ater*) populations appear to be stable in islands of suitable habitat in a “sea” of urban development.

the survey, they were stable over a 13-year period. The survey results suggest that Common Chuckwalla populations are stable in these island preserves in a sea of urban development.

Hurricane Katrina and Mississippi Turtles

The Yellow-blotched Sawback (*Graptemys flavimaculata*) is a riverine turtle that is endemic to the Pascagoula River system of southern Mississippi. Population declines led to Federal listing as a threatened species in 1991, with the most robust population inhabiting the Lower Pascagoula River near Vancleave

(~24 river km from the Pascagoula River mouth). SELMANI AND QUALLS (2008. *Herpetological Conservation and Biology* 3:224–230) conducted a mark-resight survey of this population during the spring and summer of 2005–2006. On 29 August 2005, Hurricane Katrina entered the Mississippi Gulf Coast, the location of their study site. On 13 October 2005, they conducted a one-hour preliminary visual survey by boat through the study area and identified eight individuals that had been marked prior to Katrina’s landfall, demonstrating that at least some of the 49 previously marked individuals remained in the study area. In October 2005–2006, the

authors conducted more extensive mark-resight surveys within the same section of river. The population estimate for 2006 was significantly lower than the 2005 population estimate for the same stretch of river, suggesting that numbers substantially decreased during the year following the hurricane. Of the plausible explanations for this pattern, the available evidence most strongly supports a real decline in population, presumably due to the long-term impact of Hurricane Katrina. Possible reasons for such a long-term effect include hurricane induced saltwater intrusion and low levels of dissolved oxygen with direct effects on individuals or indirect effects on the prey populations (e.g., gastropods and other aquatic macroinvertebrates).



BILL LOVE

Population sizes of Yellow-blotched Sawbacks (*Graptemyis flavimaculata*) dropped during the year following Hurricane Katrina, probably due to saltwater intrusions and low dissolved oxygen levels affecting turtles directly or their prey.

NEWS BRIEFS

California Tiger Salamander Moves Closer to Protection

The California state appeals court ruled that the California Fish and Game Commission must consider a petition to list the California Tiger Salamander (*Ambystoma californiense*) as an endangered species under the California Endangered Species Act. In a decision with potential implications for other poorly monitored species, the court ruled that the Fish and Game Commission must consider a listing petition if the information would “lead a reasonable person to conclude there is a substantial possibility” that the species could be listed. “The Fish and Game Commission ignored the multitude of known threats to the Tiger Salamander and dismissed the petition, falsely claiming it did not contain all of the data necessary to prove

the salamander population may deserve protection,” said Brian Nowicki of the Center for Biological Diversity. “Today’s ruling should set the listing process back on the right track and ultimately result in the Tiger Salamander getting the state-protected status it deserves.”



GARY NAFFS

The California state appeals court ruled that the California Fish and Game Commission must consider a petition to list the California Tiger Salamander (*Ambystoma californiense*) as an endangered species under the California Endangered Species Act.

The California Tiger Salamander is now set to advance to the status of candidate for state listing. The Santa Barbara County salamander population has been listed as Endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act since 2000, as has the Sonoma County population since 2003. The central California population has been federally listed as Threatened since 2004. The California Tiger Salamander depends on ephemeral vernal pools for breeding, but in recent decades, 95% of California’s vernal pools have already been lost, and at least 75% of the salamander’s habitat throughout the state has been eliminated. In Sonoma County, 95% of the fragmented and minimal remaining salamander habitat is threatened by development; the Santa Barbara population also is on the verge of extinction.

Proposal to Increase Critical Habitat for California Frogs

Under scrutiny for political corruption regarding numerous endangered species decisions and facing a lawsuit over improper tampering with protected critical habitat, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to restore significant areas of critical habitat for the California Red-legged Frog (*Rana draytonii*). The Service has proposed quadrupling the protected areas by designating approximately 1,804,865 acres of critical habitat for the frog in 28 California counties. “No endangered species can survive without its habitat intact, and the Red-legged Frog desperately needs protection of adequate wetlands habitat throughout its former range,” said Jeff Miller, conservation advocate with the Center for Biological Diversity. “Today’s proposal is step toward biologically meaningful protections for the frog, but unfortunately numerous other endangered species still have inadequate habitat protections because bureaucrats have illegally slashed millions of acres from proposals by agency scientists.”

In November 2007, under pressure brought about by the Center and the media highlighting Interior Department corruption, the Service announced the reversal of six illegal Endangered Species Act decisions, including the California Red-legged Frog’s 2006 critical habitat designation. The Service listed the Red-legged Frog as a threatened species in 1996. It published a proposed rule to designate 4,138,064 acres of critical habitat in 2004. In response to a lawsuit by developers, the Service revised the proposal in 2005 to only 737,912 acres, and finalized the rule in 2006 with just 450,288 acres — a reduction of 90% from the original proposed rule.



GARY M. FELLEIS, USGS

The California Red-legged Frog (*Rana draytonii*) has lost more than 70% of its historic habitat. Frog populations have declined due to habitat loss from urbanization and introduction of exotic species such as Bullfrogs.

This proposal would increase the critical habitat by approximately 1,354,577 acres. “Even with the announced increase in acreage, the Red-legged Frog will receive habitat protection for less than half the areas that agency biologists have identified as essential for the recovery of the species,” said Miller. “Under the Bush administration, the Fish and Wildlife Service has consistently slashed the size of proposed critical habitats, so we will be watching the final designation closely.”

Made famous in the Mark Twain story, “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” the California Red-legged Frog has lost more than 70% of its historic habitat. Frog populations have declined due to habitat loss from urbanization and introduction of exotic species such as Bullfrogs. The Red-legged Frog is believed to be extinct in the Central Valley and is extirpated from 99% of its Sierra Nevada range. Currently, the strongest breeding populations remaining are found along the coast from San Mateo to San Luis Obispo counties. The Red-legged Frog prefers ponds, marshes, and creeks with still water. It requires riparian and upland areas with dense vegetation and open areas for cover, aestivation (summertime hibernation), food, and basking. Undisturbed riparian vegetation also is necessary for female frogs to attach their egg masses, which float on the surface until they hatch in 5–7 months.

Agreement Protects Native Fish and Amphibians from Fish-stocking

The Pacific Rivers Council and the Center for Biological Diversity reached an agreement with the California Department of Fish and Game on interim measures to limit harm to native species caused by fish-stocking. The intent is to minimize the harm that hatchery-raised fish inflict on sensitive native fish and amphibian species while the Department prepares an Environmental Impact Report under the California Environmental Quality Act. The Agreement was spurred by a tentative order issued by Sacramento Superior Court Judge Patrick Marlette finding that stocking could cause irreparable harm to native species. “Interim measures limiting stocking are needed to help save California’s native fish and frogs from extinction,” said Noah Greenwald,



WALTER STEGMUND



SHALUA REDWALL



DIMITAR BOJANTCHEV

The Cascades Frog (*Rana cascadae*, top), Northern Leopard Frog (*Lithobates [Rana] pipiens*, middle), and Oregon Spotted Frog (*Rana pretiosa*, bottom) are among the amphibian species that will benefit from a new agreement limiting the stocking of non-native fish to many California waters.

biodiversity program director for the Center for Biological Diversity. “Fish and Game will still be able to stock hatchery fish, but mainly in places where they won’t harm native species.”

Florida Turtles Need a Reprieve

Several of the world’s leading turtle scientists have called on the Governor of Florida to end the commercial hunting of turtles which supplies eastern Asia. The experts, brought together by the Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group of IUCN’s Species Survival Commission, made their plea in a letter to Governor Charlie Crist. “Florida’s freshwater turtles are being harvested at an unsustainable rate to supply East Asian food and medicinal markets,” the letter said. “New rules recently implemented by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) do not resolve this issue.”

On 17 September 2008, the FWC had voted to allow commercial fishermen to catch 20 softshell turtles a day. “Although this was an improvement, as

previously there were no catch limits, the limit is still too high,” says Anders Rhodin, Chair of IUCN’s Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group. “Two fishermen working five days a week could take 200 animals or three-quarters of a ton of turtles a week. That is not adequate protection for Florida’s wild turtle populations.”

The 32 turtle experts recommended that the FWC make a rule that allows individuals to take no more than one turtle a day from the wild and two turtles a day per group of individuals. They called on Governor Crist to ask the Commission to enact this rule.

The FWC had argued that most turtles exported from Florida are farm-raised, but according to the experts the numbers are misleading. Although 90% of the individual turtles exported from Florida are from farms, these are nearly all tiny hatchlings, they say, and the bulk of shipments by weight appear to be wild-caught adult turtles.

“An FWC Law Enforcement Intelligence Bulletin from March 2008 reported 1,600–3,000 lbs of live turtles flown out of Tampa weekly,” says Matt Aresco, a spokesperson for the IUCN Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group. “It seems unlikely that these are all farmed hatchlings, which only weigh about one third of an ounce each.”

The experts said their best guess is that these are mostly adult Florida Softshell Turtles (*Apalone ferox*), but added they don’t know for sure because

FWC does not collect data on the species, sizes, or numbers of turtles that are being sent out of state. They recommended a permanent end to the commercial harvest of turtles in Florida.

In a welcome and strong demonstration of political support for wildlife protection, Governor Crist responded to the letter by urging the FWC to consider moving toward a complete ban on harvesting of wild turtles in Florida.

IUCN, 25 November 2008

Don’t Muddy Ohio Waters

The Ohio Environmental Protection Agency should be in charge of protecting the state’s waterways from pollution, whether that pollution comes from a factory pipe, a large-scale farm, or the byproducts of mining coal. A proposed bill to put state mining officials in charge of granting water-pollution permits for coalmines is a bad idea.

State Senator Timothy J. Grendell (R-Chesterland) is behind the bill to switch authority from the EPA to mining bureaucrats in the Ohio Department of Natural Resources. This proposal is similar to a 2001 state law — also a bad idea — that transferred the state EPA’s authority to regulate large-scale livestock farms to the Department of Agriculture. That transfer still isn’t final, because the U.S. EPA, which has ultimate responsibility for enforcing the 1972 federal Clean Water Act, hasn’t approved it.

In a recent public-comment meeting, opponents of the farm-regulation switch



Endangered Hellbenders (*Cryptobranchus alleganiensis*) occur in Ohio streams affected by pollution from coalmines.

pointed out that the Department of Agriculture’s mission is to promote farming in Ohio, not to be a watchdog. The same potential for conflict of interest exists in putting ODNR’s Division of Mineral Resources Management in charge of water-pollution permits for mines.

The timing of the bill lends weight to the suspicion that the real goal is to allow an end run by a major mine company that has been denied a permit by the EPA. Murray Energy Corp., owner of Ohio’s largest underground coalmines, wants to bury Casey Run, a 2-mile-long stream in eastern Ohio, under a 1.85-billion-gallon coal-slurry lagoon. Slurry is water contaminated with coal dust after it has been used to wash coal. In 2005, a broken slurry pipeline from a Murray Energy-owned mine blackened 2,300 feet of Belmont County’s Captina Creek, killing thousands of fish in a habitat that supports the endangered Hellbender salamander.

Casey Run is a tributary of Captina Creek. EPA scientists, in recommending denial of the permit for the massive lagoon, said it would pose “insurmountable” environmental concerns for the high-quality water resource. Murray officials say they’ll have to close two mines employing about 1,000 people if they can’t build the slurry lagoon, but EPA and ODNR officials said the company could find other ways to dispose of its waste.

Murray Energy’s checkered track record of multiple environmental and safety violations in Ohio and elsewhere, including the Crandall Canyon mine cave-in that killed six men in Utah in August 2007, argues against easing regulation of the company. Regardless of one company’s history, safeguarding Ohio’s waterways should remain with the agency for which environmental protection is the core mission.



Most of the 1,600–3,000 lbs of live turtles flown out of Tampa each week probably are Florida Softshell Turtles (*Apalone ferox*) destined for East Asian food and medicinal markets.