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Halt the loss of biodiversity

NEWS RELEASE

Dramatic Declines for European Amphibians

Global Amphibian Assessment released today

Brussels, Belgium, October 14th 2004 (IUCN) –

Remarkably in Europe distinct species of the relatively small amphibian fauna are still being identified as detailed in the Global Amphibian Assessment released today by IUCN/SSC, Conservation International and NatureServe. These findings highlight the need for continued research, if Europe is serious about meeting its ambitious political target of “halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010.” “These findings show that Europe may lose species before they are even fully known to us if we do not take action on the 2010 target ” said Tamás Marghescu, IUCN Regional Director for Europe.

The identification of these species and what threatens them, helps to pinpoint the status of biodiversity in Europe. Mr. Marghescu said “If we do not realise what we have now, we will realise too late what we lost”. Our increased ability to identify distinct species has been often related to advances in taxonomic methods and additional field surveys. Two examples of recently described European species are:

1. Iberian Parsley Frog *Pelodytes ibericus* - identified and described in 2000 from southern Portugal and Spain. This species was until recently confused with the Parsley Frog *Pelobates punctatus*.
2. Betic Midwife Toad *Alytes dickhilleni* - described in 1995 from fragmented montane populations in southeastern Spain. This species is globally threatened and is considered to be Vulnerable, mostly because of the loss of suitable breeding habitat.

Main threats to Amphibian Species in Europe

Currently, the main threats to amphibian species in Europe are habitat loss and degradation, often through the intensification of agricultural practices, and the introduction of non-native species (especially to aquatic habitats). These factors are severely impacting many amphibian populations, and even some relatively widespread and well known species, such as the European Tree Frog (*Hyla arborea*) are undergoing substantial declines. The European Tree Frog is now categorised as Near Threatened under the IUCN Categories and Criteria because populations are undergoing such a significant decline.

A recent additional threat to the amphibians of Europe is the discovery of a fungal disease, called chytridiomycosis, that attacks the skin of adults and the mouthparts of tadpoles. There is a gradually emerging consensus that infection with chytridiomycosis is related to recent dramatic declines of amphibian species, most especially in parts of Australia, North America and Latin America.

In Europe, the disease has severely impacted populations of the Common Midwife Toad (*Alytes obstetricans*) in central Spain. And, although it is not known to what extent amphibian populations will be impacted in Europe by this disease, it is apparent that further monitoring is particularly urgent.

Five of the most threatened species of Amphibians in Europe.

(All of these species are considered to be Endangered under the IUCN Red List Categories and Criteria)

1. Sardinian Brook Salamander (*Euproctus platycephalus*) - This species is endemic to the island of Sardinia, where it is threatened by water pollution, introduced species and habitat fragmentation.
2. Supramonte Cave Salamander (*Speleomantes supramontis*) - This species is endemic to Sardinia where it is found in humid rocky areas. It is threatened by habitat loss.
3. Karpathos Frog (*Rana cerigensis*) - This species is known only from Karpathos Island and Rhodes Islands in Greece. It is largely threatened by loss of suitable aquatic habitats through the overextraction of water.
4. Cretan Frog (*Rana cretensis*) - This species is endemic to the island of Crete, Greece where it is threatened by habitat loss through the overextraction of water for agriculture and other uses.
5. Luschan's Salamander (*Salamandra luschani*) - This species is present in Greece and Turkey. It is found in rocky limestone areas and is threatened by habitat loss, especially in coastal regions.

Positive Examples of meeting the 2010 target

Although amphibian species in Europe face many challenges, there is room for optimism and encouragement for taking action to meet the 2010 target. The Mallorcan Midwife Toad (*Alytes muletensis*) provides a positive case in point.

The Mallorcan Midwife Toad is restricted to the island of Mallorca, in the Balearic Islands of Spain. Because of the impacts of introduced predators and habitat loss, this species became restricted to a few narrow, limestone gorges. In view of the severe population fragmentation and continuing decline of the already small global population of this species, it was listed as 'Critically Endangered' in the 1996 IUCN Red List of Threatened Animals.

During 1985, a captive-breeding programme was initiated for the toad; this had the specific aim of providing animals for reintroduction at suitable release sites. The first reintroductions took place in 1989, and following these initial releases the species was reintroduced into several more sites. In addition to the reintroduction process, conservation measures were undertaken to assist in the recovery of the existing wild populations.

The reintroductions and associated habitat creation and management programmes have been very successful. Both the range and number of populations of the Mallorcan Midwife Toad have moderately, but constantly, increased. While the current, successful recovery programme will probably need to be continued indefinitely, the conservation status of the species is considered to have improved so much that it has been listed as 'Vulnerable' in the 2004 IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

Countdown 2010

The goal of halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010 is the subject of several key international *agreements*. Each recognises the rapid degradation of ecosystems and habitats, the increasing threat to many species populations and the urgent need to take action that will halt the decline in irreplaceable natural resources. **"Countdown 2010"**, launched in May 2004, has the goal that **"All European governments, at every level, have taken the necessary actions to halt the loss of biodiversity by 2010"**. *Countdown 2010 will act as an independent communications and technical support instrument* to profile the importance of the global 2010 commitments in the EU and a Pan-European context and to monitor the progress of the implementation of these commitments via highly visible actions, aiming to reach the below target groups. Countdown 2010 focuses on the Kyiv Biodiversity commitments, the Malahide targets, and the CBD Programme of Work on Protected Areas. Countdown 2010 is a strategic alliance between many governmental and non-governmental partners who are committed to the goal of halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010.

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