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It's Not Easy Being Green: Frogs (and Many of Our Other Slimy Friends) Need Help

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According to our top scientists we're in the midst of an extinction crisis in which plants and animals are going extinct at a greatly accelerated rate.

At the very center of this unprecedented crisis are our nation's amphibians and reptiles, with 1 in every 4 now considered at risk of extinction.

It was only 30 to 40 short years ago that hikers reaching many high-mountain lakes in the Sierras were greeted by the raspy croaks of hundreds of yellow-legged frogs.

Now these frogs have declined by about 90 percent and you'd count yourself lucky to hear one.

How could that possibly have happened -- way up there -- in such a short period of time?

The answer: A combination of toxic pesticides wafting up from agricultural fields below, a killer disease brought from another continent, introduced fish and habitat loss.

Yellow-legged frogs are hardly alone. The boreal toad has been reduced to less than 1

percent of its historic breeding areas in the southern Rockies. The Western pond turtle, once common from Washington to Baja California, now occurs in just a handful of locations.

And those kinds of alarming declines are hitting amphibians and reptiles across the nation in all 50 states. That's why I analyzed the nation's most imperiled amphibians and reptiles for a report released this week titled "Dying for Protection: The 10 Most Vulnerable, Least Protected Amphibians and Reptiles in the United States."

The report details the population declines and ongoing threats that have left once-common species like a 2-foot-long eastern salamander, a colorful northeastern turtle and a Florida lizard now threatened by sea level rise all spiraling toward extinction.

The challenge of recovering imperiled populations of animals, along with restoring the health of the environments we share with them, is daunting. But with the help of the Endangered Species Act, which has prevented the extinction of 99 percent of the plants and animals it protects, we can begin the work of turning things around.

And there's much work to be done. Despite their dire condition, amphibians and reptiles

make up only 61 of the approximately 1,400 U.S. species protected under the Endangered Species Act.

To help correct that imbalance, the Center for Biological Diversity and several internationally renowned conservation scientists, including E.O. Wilson and Thomas Lovejoy, filed a petition last year seeking Endangered Species Act protection for 53 of the nation's most threatened species of amphibians and reptiles. In 2011 the Center signed a landmark settlement with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that is speeding protection decisions for 757 species, including dozens of amphibians and reptiles.

The 10 species included in this new report are among the neediest of the many reptiles and amphibians still waiting for the lifesaving protection of the Act. They need our help now if they're going to survive.

Early this year Endangered Species Act protection was proposed for two species of yellow-legged frogs, along with more than a million acres of critical habitat essential for their protection and recovery. But despite the dire state of the frog's population and ecosystem, radically conservative congressmen in California are leading a short-sighted push to limit the frog's critical habitat.

Contrary to their fictional, fear-mongering claims that protecting the frog could close down large stretches of the California federal lands to public use, quite the opposite is true: Protecting our amphibians and reptiles will always be a good way not only to protect these animals but to protect the environments we share with them, and the jobs, of all kinds, provided by their delicate, irreplaceable ecosystems.

Over the long term, one of the strongest jobs protection programs we've got is the Endangered Species Act.

All we have to do is use it.

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