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## Save Georgia's amphibians

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With their two-foot-long bodies, flattened heads and rudder-like tails, the giant salamanders that once inhabited hundreds of waterways across the eastern U.S. are marvels of millions of years of evolution.

Known as hellbenders, Allegheny alligators, and snot otters, they're creatures of legend. Fully aquatic amphibians, they typically come out after dark to prowl river bottoms for insects, crayfish and other salamanders.

Stories abound of the hellbender's venomous bite, but they are harmless to humans. Human activities, however, are having a detrimental impact on hellbenders. That's why the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agreed to determine within five years whether

these reclusive giants deserve Endangered Species Act protections.

Let's hope it's not too late.

If you're patient, and sturdy enough to hold your ground in fast-moving streams, you can still find North America's largest amphibian lurking in some of the remote Appalachian creeks of northern Georgia. Nowadays, however, it's easy to search streams where hellbenders have thrived for generations and come up empty handed.

Clinging beneath rocks in fast-moving waterways, they "breathe" through loose skin folds on their sides along with a pair of covered gills on the side of their heads. They require well-oxygenated water that's free of pollution and unnatural levels of silt.

Along with disease and illegal collecting, the main reason they've disappeared from

much of a historic range that reaches from New York to the Midwest and Georgia is that the clean water they need is disappearing due to development, dams, mining, logging and poor agricultural practices.

Many of the challenges facing hellbenders are impacting hundreds of aquatic animals that have long thrived here in the Southeast. Home to over 60 percent of U.S. fish species and 90 percent of our mussel species, the region also contains more amphibians and aquatic reptiles than any other in the country.

The Southeast has the richest aquatic fauna of any temperate area in the world. Unfortunately, it's also one of the most imperiled ecosystems on Earth. Along with the declines of many amphibians and reptiles, more than 28 percent of the region's fishes and over 70

percent of its mussels are nearing extinction.

Yet the majority of southeastern aquatic species aren't protected by the Endangered Species Act or any other law.

When the Endangered Species Act is applied, it works: the majority of plants and animals under its protection have been saved from extinction with many headed toward recovery.

For every species we protect, we're protecting not only their environment, but the ecosystem we all share.

One-third of our nation's amphibians are now at risk of extinction. As we grow our population and economy, we're not doing a good enough job of protecting our water quality. The sooner we hear that message, the sooner we can protect unique species like the hellbender and preserve the health of the waterways we all depend on.