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Launch for amphibian 'life raft'

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A world of amphibians

Conservationists have launched a new initiative aimed at safeguarding the world's amphibians from extinction.

The Amphibian Survival Alliance will bring together existing projects and organisations, improving co-ordination, scientific research and fund-raising.

About a third of amphibian species are threatened with extinctions.

A two-day summit held last week in London identified the two main threats as destruction of habitat and the fungal disease chytridiomycosis.

"The world's amphibians are facing an uphill battle for survival," said James Collins, co-chair of the Amphibian Specialist Group (ASG) co-ordinated by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

“ If we want to stop the amphibian extinction crisis, we have to protect the areas where amphibians are threatened by habitat destruction ”

Claude Gascon, ASG

[Earth Watch: Hopping mad](#)

"By far the worst threats are infectious disease and habitat destruction, so the Alliance will focus on these issues first."

Last week's meeting, held at the Zoological Society of London (ZSL), declared that research into possible treatments for the chytrid fungus should be a top priority.

Identified only a decade ago, the fungus now infects amphibians in the Americas, Australia,

Europe, Asia and Africa.

How it originated and how it kills are matters of ongoing research.

But in practical terms, finding something that can stop it in open country rather than the laboratory is the big challenge.

Researchers have found that some amphibian species carry chemicals on their skin that provide a natural defence.

WHAT ARE AMPHIBIANS?



First true amphibians evolved about 250m years ago

There are three orders: frogs (including toads), salamanders (including newts) and caecilians, which are limbless

Adapted to many different aquatic and terrestrial habitats

Present today on every continent except Antarctica

Many undergo metamorphosis, from larvae to adults

The idea is to see whether these chemicals can be turned into something that can attack the fungus in the wild, providing a defence for species that currently have none.

The new Amphibian Survival Alliance (ASA) sees this line of research as an urgent priority.

More difficult to tackle will be the ongoing destruction of habitat that is a concern in most continents, but especially in parts of Asia that are seeing rapid expansion of cities, industry and infrastructure.

"If we want to stop the amphibian extinction crisis, we have to protect the areas where amphibians are threatened by habitat destruction," said Claude Gascon, the Amphibian Specialist Group's other co-chair.

"One of the reasons amphibians are in such dire straits is because many species are only found in single sites and are therefore much more susceptible to habitat loss."

As a group, amphibians are considerably more threatened than birds, mammals, fish or

reptiles.

Apart from habitat loss and chytrid, issues of concern are:

- unsustainable hunting for food, medicine and the pet trade
- chemical pollution
- climatic change
- introduced species
- other infectious diseases

The formation of the ASA was proposed in 2006 but adequate financial and institutional backing did not materialise.

At that stage scientists were divided over how money and resources should be split between conservation in the wild and captive breeding.

Now there is general agreement that both strategies are necessary.

Initial backing emerged at the ZSL meeting in the form of a \$200,000 pledge that will fund the ASA co-ordinator's post for two years.

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Group to focus on saving amphibians

- Story Highlights
- Amphibian Survival Alliance aims to save threatened frogs, toads, salamanders
- One in three of 6,000 recognized amphibian species at risk of extinction, group says
- 122 amphibian species have gone extinct since 1980, group says
- Amphibian species could help in development of medicines, scientist says

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(CNN) -- The world has a new alliance to save vanishing frogs, toads and salamanders.



A frog swims in a pond in Munich, Germany, in June.

A coalition of organizations established the Amphibian Survival Alliance this month to conserve species threatened by deadly fungus, habitat loss, pollution, pesticides and climate change. The scientists said amphibians are the world's most threatened group of animals.

Though they thrived on Earth for more than 360 million years, one in three of the 6,000 recognized amphibian species are now at risk of extinction and as many as 122 species have gone extinct since 1980, according to the [International Union for the Conservation of Nature](#)'s amphibian specialist group.

"The world's amphibians are facing an uphill battle for survival," said James Collins of Arizona State University, co-chairman of the group.

He said the new alliance, formed at the Amphibian Mini Summit at the Zoological Society of London, will focus efforts on the biggest threat to amphibians: infectious disease and habitat destruction. The group includes amphibian specialists working in the wild as well as those in zoos, aquariums and botanical gardens worldwide.

"Amphibians have so much to offer humans," said amphibian specialist Simon Stuart. "Many have an arsenal of compounds stored in their skin that have the potential to address a multitude of human diseases."

But as amphibians die out, so do opportunities to develop new medicines, he said. The southern gastric brooding frog, for instance, could have led to the development of a treatment for human peptic ulcers had it not gone extinct, Stuart said.

"We simply cannot afford to let this current amphibian extinction crisis go unchecked," he said.

Andrew Blaustein, who began documenting amphibian declines two decades ago, said the loss of species was part of an overall biodiversity crisis.

"[Amphibians](#) seem to have been hit the hardest of all vertebrate species," said Blaustein, a professor of zoology at Oregon State University. "The long-term ecological repercussions of their decline could be profound, and we have to do something about it."