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One Egg at a Time: Largest Amphibian and Reptile Headstarting Program Underway in US

Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy Leading Effort for Multiple Endangered Species

UNITED STATES, December 11, 2024 - In the largest amphibian and reptile headstarting effort in the US by a nongovernmental organization, several species perilously close to extinction are being reared in captivity and released to combat dramatic population declines. The Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy (ARC), a national nonprofit to conserve imperiled wildlife, is providing hope for endangered species with extensive headstarting programs and more.

"Headstarting isn't a new technique, but ARC is taking it to an entirely new level," said Executive Director JJ Apodaca. "In the most comprehensive effort of its kind, we're targeting multiple critically imperiled species simultaneously while also tackling the root causes of their declines."

In headstarting, young animals are raised in captivity past their most vulnerable life stages and then released back into the wild. When these species are very small (or when they're eggs), they're especially easy targets for predators, and they're more likely to be lost to other natural causes as well, such as drought.

To this end, last week, on a drizzly fall morning in Georgia's Coastal Plain, ARC biologists and partners embarked on a mission to help safeguard one of the country's most imperiled amphibians: the Threatened frosted flatwoods salamander. Equipped with kneepads, headlamps, and gloves, they carefully scoured seasonal wetlands for the salamanders' delicate, translucent eggs in order to collect them.

Although removing their eggs may sound unconventional, it's part of a headstarting program for these salamanders, a strategic way ARC is bolstering their tiny, declining populations.

These eggs are hatched in protected mesocosms, and the larvae (like tadpoles) are raised until they are large enough to increase their odds of survival. This year, ARC and its partners released more than 350 juvenile salamanders back into their native habitats, reinforcing a population that has faced dramatic declines due to habitat loss and other threats.

The organization is also employing the approach for other vulnerable species like the Threatened bog turtle, Threatened Chiricahua leopard frog, Endangered Houston toad, and imperiled gopher frog, providing them a crucial boost.

However, while headstarting is a powerful tool, it cannot succeed in isolation. "You can't headstart your way out of species declines," said Apodaca. "It's like trying to stop a leak with a sponge. Unless you address the underlying issues, especially habitat destruction and invasive species, they'll seep through and continue to cause problems."

That's why ARC's approach goes beyond headstarting. Through their work in PARCAs (Priority Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Areas), the organization integrates headstarting into broader strategies that include habitat restoration, threat mitigation, and long-term monitoring.

"For us, headstarting is a way to buy time," Apodaca explained. "It allows us to stabilize populations while we work on the larger, systemic challenges threatening these species."

ARC's work has gained recognition not just for its scale but also for its innovation and collaboration. By partnering with federal and state agencies, academic institutions, and local communities, ARC ensures that its conservation strategies are grounded in science and tailored to the unique needs of each species and habitat.

"Every egg, larvae, and juvenile we release back into the wild represents hope for the future," said Apodaca. "This work is a testament to what we can achieve when we combine cutting-edge science, strategic action, partnership, and a deep commitment to conserving these incredible species for generations to come."

About Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy (ARC)
Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy, or ARC, is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit focused on identifying and conserving the highest priority places for amphibians and reptiles in the United States. We protect endangered amphibians and reptiles through a strategic, scientific, and passionate approach. We believe the conservation of amphibians, reptiles, and the habitats they depend on is vitally important. To learn more, visit ARCProtects.org.

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