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Out of site out of mind?

Habitat degradation and loss pushes amphibian species to the brink of extinction. Amphibian species are going extinct before even being described.



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Bangkok, Thailand

One third of the world's 6 000 amphibian species are threatened with extinction. According to the IUCN Redlist, 122 species have become extinct globally over the past 25 years. One-third of these species are native to Asia, which also has two thirds of the world's human population that has led to drastic changes in land-use driving many amphibians to the brink of extinction.

"Most amphibians are threatened by habitat loss because they have very peculiar and small ranges, what you would call point endemism. So if you loose a small patch of forest even as little as one km² then you may loose a species", **Dr. Madhava Meegaskumbura**, Harvard University.

Amphibians are amongst the oldest organisms in the world. They also play an important role in maintaining a balance of nature, as both predator and prey, as biological pest controllers, minimising the spread of diseases, and sometimes acting as bio-indicators of climate change and environmental stress. Development in recent years has encroached into vital amphibian habitats, destroying the ecological balance.

In Asia, **China** has the largest number of amphibians threatened with extinction (96 species out of 374 or 26%) followed by **India** (67 species or 25% of India's amphibian fauna). **Japan** has 59 of the world's amphibians, with as much as 34% threatened with extinction. **The Philippines** supports 104 amphibian species, with 46% of its amphibians threatened by extinction placing the country high on the list in Asia. **Indonesia**, an amphibian hotspot with 392 amphibian species has 35% of its amphibian species listed under the data deficient category and a true assessment therefore cannot be made. Habitat loss, climate change, introduction of exotic species and commercial trade in amphibians are the biggest threats faced by amphibians in Asia.

Out of the extinct species in Asia 55% are native to Sri Lanka which has lost 20% of its amphibian fauna. Many montane species in Sri Lanka are on the brink of extinction and have been categorized as critically endangered. Species that lay eggs on the leaves are the most threatened and vulnerable group because they need 90 days of continued humidity to develop, says **Dr. Meegaskumbura**. The environmental conditions may be disrupted by climate change resulting in further loss of species.

Of the remaining species more than 50% are at risk of extinction. Only 800 km² or 5% of the islands original rainforest cover remains. Most of amphibian extinctions in Sri Lanka occurred about 150 years ago when forest where cleared to make way for coffee and later tea plantations. *"Tea companies do not need to further extend their land-use area. Planting new tea bush varieties can increase the yield from 1500kg/Ha to 4000kg/Ha..."* says **Dilhan C. Fernando**, Marketing Director Dilmah Tea, so there is no need for further encroachment on species habitats.

"We cannot loose sight of the fact that land-use change is certainly the number one cause of species loss around the world, especially amphibians so we have to pay significant attention to this" **Prof. James Collins**, Arizona State University and Amphibian Specialist Group Co-chair.

The scientific community's urgent call for globally coordinated conservation action, the *Amphibian Conservation Action Plan* (ACAP) addresses the alarming increase in amphibian extinctions. One of the primary activities is a captive breeding strategy called *Amphibian Ark*. *"Captive breeding is good for re-introduction into the wild, but the problem is the habitat, so if you don't do anything about the habitat right now to prevent further habitat losses, there is little point in keeping the amphibians in a breeding centre",* says **Dr. Meegaskumbura**

The influence of business on our environment is steadily increasing. Engaging with business therefore becomes all the more important to address the conservation challenges of our time. *"Amphibians are facing an extinction crisis. Raising awareness and building new partnerships and relationships for ACAP implementation, where both business and conservation interests are met are fundamental"* **Shiranee Yasaratne**, Head, IUCN Asia Business and Biodiversity Programme.

Materials for the Media:

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www.iucn.org/asia/amphibians
www.iucnredlist.org/amphibians
www.amphibians.org/
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