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Phoenix Zoo and Wildlife Agency Partners Celebrate 25 Years Conserving Arizona Frogs

More than 26,000 Chiricahua leopard frogs have been released to the wild.

PHOENIX (October 19, 2020) -2020 marks the 25th anniversary of collaboration between the Arizona Center for Nature Conservation (ACNC)/Phoenix Zoo (Zoo), Arizona Game and Fish Department (AZGFD), United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and United States Forest Service (USFS) to save the threatened Chiricahua leopard frog (*Rana chiricahuensis*) in Arizona. Over 26,000 tadpoles and frogs raised at the Zoo have been released to the wild since the program began.

In 1995, the Phoenix Zoo launched its leopard frog recovery program with just a few small tanks in the curator's office. Today, the Zoo runs the program from the Arthur L. and Elaine V. Johnson Foundation Native Species Conservation Center, with dedicated indoor and outdoor space for leopard frog propagation. In late September, staff from AZGFD and the Zoo collaborated on the year's final release of zoo-reared frogs to the wild in Arizona.

AZGFD Ranid Frogs Project Coordinator Audrey Owens noted, "The Phoenix Zoo has been at the forefront of the Chiricahua leopard frog reintroduction program since it began raising frogs 25 years ago, when the species had declined from nearly 80% of its range. Thanks to the Zoo's efforts, we have more stability in frog populations in southeastern Arizona. Today, the Zoo's expanded captive rearing program contributes to our recovery work in high elevation populations in the northern part of their range, where disease threatens populations of our wild frogs."

Christina Akins, District Wildlife Biologist on the Tonto National Forest stated: "Our partnership with the Zoo, AZGFD, and USFWS has allowed USFS biologists to participate in recovery efforts and re-establish frog populations on National Forest lands across Arizona. We are proud to contribute to this partnership and feel privileged to provide wild egg

masses to the Zoo for rearing and a head start before being released back to National Forest lands.”

“We are proud to be entrusted with the care of this threatened species and honored to have contributed to the success of this recovery effort. Our job is to provide healthy, robust egg masses, tadpoles and frogs to reintroduce frogs across their native range in Arizona. We love being part of this collaboration and celebrate this milestone moment as we demonstrate our ongoing commitment to the conservation of native wildlife,” said ACNC/Phoenix Zoo President and CEO Bert Castro.

Chiricahua leopard frogs are an aquatic species found only in Arizona, western New Mexico and northern Mexico. They have declined due to loss of habitat, disease, and competition from and predation by non-native species. Establishing new populations and augmenting existing populations is a key component of the recovery strategy for the frog. Each year, biologists recommend where help from the Zoo is most needed to augment frog populations in the wild. Chiricahua leopard frog partners use a mix of approaches, releasing frogs at different life stages (egg masses, tadpoles, froglets and frogs) in hopes of maximizing the long-term success of the release efforts. As few as ten percent of all frog eggs laid in the wild are thought to survive to adulthood. The Zoo helps by “head-starting” wild egg masses and raising egg masses laid by adult frogs living at the Zoo’s Johnson Conservation Center, which provides a protected environment for the eggs until they reach the less vulnerable tadpole or young frog stage. Zoo staff continually work to improve their results, adjusting management and care protocols to maximize the number of healthy egg masses, tadpoles and frogs available for release.

“We appreciate the hard work that all of our partners are doing to ensure the Chiricahua leopard frog continues to be part of Arizona’s incredibly diverse wildlife,” said Cat Crawford, USFWS biologist. “Recovery of the frog will only happen through long-term collaborative efforts of partners as exemplified by the Phoenix Zoo over the past 25 years.”

This anniversary is possible thanks to the trust and appreciation shared by the Zoo and its state and federal partners, developed through years working together on a common goal. “Ultimately, we’d like to be put out of the leopard frog head-starting business, because that would mean we’ve achieved our goal of having self-sustaining populations of Chiricahua leopard frogs throughout their range. But as long as we’re needed, we are committed to being a part of this important recovery effort,” said Castro.

“Rearing Chiricahua leopard frogs at the Phoenix Zoo contributes to one of the largest amphibian reintroduction efforts in the country. We are grateful for this long-standing partnership,” said Owens. “The reestablishment of Zoo-raised frogs into the wild is one of the most significant achievements towards recovery of Chiricahua leopard frogs in Arizona.”

Broll:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/9qoex193s9fsx4h/AAB1BqPETqpfOMxf4gZ0wmrca?dl=0>

Credit: Arizona Game & Fish Department (AZGFD)

YouTube pre-produced package: <https://youtu.be/aWuPAzGpj3k>

Credit: Arizona Game & Fish Department (AZGFD)

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About the Arizona Center for Nature Conservation

The Arizona Center for Nature Conservation operates the Phoenix Zoo.

The ACNC advances the stewardship and conservation of animals and their habitats while providing experiences that inspire people and motivate them to care for the natural world.

The Phoenix Zoo is the only zoo in the Valley accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums and is a non-profit zoological park, serving 1.4 million guests annually. The Zoo is home to more than 3,000 animals, many of which are endangered and threatened species. For information on upcoming events, exhibits and activities at the Phoenix Zoo, visit www.phoenixzoo.org.

About Arizona Game and Fish Department

The Arizona Game and Fish Department (AZGFD) is responsible for conserving and protecting more than 800 species of native wildlife, the most of any inland state. The department does not receive any of the state's general tax funds and operates under a user-pay, public-benefit model. www.azgfd.gov

About the United States Forest Service

The USFS Southwest Region 3 Threatened, Endangered & Sensitive (TES) Species Program is dedicated to conserve and recover plant and animal species that need special management attention and to restore National Forest and Grassland ecosystems and habitats. The TES program involves a variety of activities conducted by our agency and partners, including inventory and monitoring, habitat improvements, species reintroductions, development of conservation strategies, research, and information and education. Working with other Federal and State agencies, academic institutions, private organizations and citizens is vital to leverage limited resources and achieve effective on-the-ground conservation accomplishments.

About the United States Fish and Wildlife Service

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service works with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. For more information, <http://www.fws.gov>, or connect with us through any of these social media channels: [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Flickr](#), [YouTube](#).