

Online Conservation Needs Assessments

By Kevin Johnson

Amphibian Ark is very excited to announce the launch of our online Amphibian Conservation Needs Assessment program at www.ConservationNeeds.org. Since 2007, AArk staff and our partners have worked with our colleagues from the IUCN Amphibian Specialist Group (ASG), the international *ex situ* amphibian conservation community and other stakeholders to evaluate the conservation needs of 3,490 amphibian species. With the move to an online format, we are now able to continue these assessments in a more inclusive environment, with assessments for multiple countries being undertaken at the same time.

BACKGROUND

The Conservation Needs Assessment process was initially developed in 2006, during an Amphibian *Ex Situ* Conservation Planning workshop in El Valle de Anton, Panama, when a taxon selection and prioritization working group developed a decision tree for the selection and prioritization of species that are most in need of *ex situ* (captive) assistance. The decision tree has subsequently been reviewed and refined, and has now evolved into the [Amphibian Ark Conservation Needs Assessment process](#), which generates prioritized recommendations for both *in situ* and *ex situ* conservation actions. The assessment process has proven to be a logical, transparent, and repeatable procedure for guiding amphibian conservation activities within a country or region.

Between 2007 and the end of 2014, Amphibian Ark staff facilitated 26 national or regional workshops to assess the conservation needs of 3,375 (46%) of the world's amphibian species. With funding for physical workshops becoming more difficult to obtain, the decision was made to build an online version of the assessment process as a solution for ensuring assessments could continue. In late 2014, thanks to the financial support of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria (EAZA), and the Zoo and Aquarium Association (ZAA) we began development of an online assessment program, and all previous assessments have now been migrated into the new system. Assessments from previous workshops can be reviewed and updated using the online program.

The information provided in the assessments is then used to prioritize each species for one or more recommended conservation actions. These recommendations are then used to guide the next steps required for the conservation of each species. At the national level, this is most often the development of a National Action Plan for the

group of species being assessed (*e.g.*, Amphibians). Conservation practitioners are then able to focus their efforts and resources on the species and environments that are most in need of help, and are likely to benefit the most from those efforts. National action plans generally contain detailed and prioritized conservation actions for both *in situ* and *ex situ* programs, and often contain species-level actions for all threatened species.

Conservation resources are limited, and with thousands of threatened species in need of help, the Conservation Needs Assessment process seeks to objectively and consistently identify priority species and their immediate conservation needs.

WHO MAKES THE ASSESSMENTS?

During the past seven years, around 350 ASG members, scientists, field biologists and researchers, animal husbandry experts and other stakeholders have contributed their expertise as assessors during 26 Amphibian Conservation Needs Assessment workshops. Combining and sharing the expertise and experiences of all of these people is vital to enhance the assessments, ensuring that appropriate recommendations for priority national and global conservation actions are delivered. Collectively, they have determined the best course of conservation action to help prevent the extinctions of threatened amphibian species in the wild.

Anyone who has the appropriate expertise is welcome to contribute to the online assessments. Since the bulk of the information required for the assessments relates to the current status of species in the wild, and the threats they face, the primary source of information comes from people with recent knowledge of species in the field. The assessments also contain some details of past *ex situ* experiences for each species, so input from the *ex situ* amphibian conservation community is also required to ensure complete and thorough assessments.

Requests to become an assessor can be made by completing the short registration form or by clicking the "Signup to get started!" button on the Home page. Requests will be verified and approved by the appropriate National Facilitator - normally ASG Chairs, or Amphibian Ark staff - and email notification will be sent as soon as the request has been approved. This approval process ensures that all assessors have appropriate expertise, resulting in assessments and the conservation actions recommended by those assessments that are of the highest possible quality.



CONSERVATION NEEDS ASSESSMENTS

The new Conservation Needs Assessment logo, "Endless Horizon", created by Danny Beckwith. The logo represents the sunset (potential species extinction), and the horizon represents the assessment process, that will help prolong species' existence.



Participants at an amphibian Conservation Needs Assessment workshop in São Paulo, Brazil. The new online assessment program allows these assessments to continue in a more inclusive environment, with assessments for multiple countries being undertaken at the same time. Photo: Kevin Johnson.

FACILITATING NATIONAL ASSESSMENTS

Prioritizing species for their conservation actions has most often been done at the national level, since conservation actions are usually also undertaken at the national level. To help facilitate a complete assessment of a country's amphibians, the National Facilitator will work with other local ASG members to determine who the most appropriate assessors are, and to allocate species to each of the assessors. If more than one assessor has expertise in each species, separate assessments can be made by each of the assessors, and the assessments are then automatically consolidated to generate a single set of recommended conservation actions for the species.

All assessments must be reviewed and endorsed by the appropriate National Facilitator before they are included in reports such as National Recommended Conservation Actions, and before those assessments can be viewed by users of the assessment data. This approval process ensures that all assessments have been made using the most current information known for each species; that vital components of an assessment have not been overlooked; and that those assessments and the recommended conservation actions are of the highest possible quality. This review and approval process can be done by a small group of people.

PLANNING FOR A NATIONAL ASSESSMENT

One of the key components of the Conservation Needs Assessment process is to organize assessments for all amphibian species in a country, as the first step in the development of a national amphibian conservation action plan. As well as using the new online application, national assessments can still be undertaken during a physical workshop if that is the preferred option.

Workshop-based assessments bring together the leading amphibian experts for the country's amphibians, along with other

relevant stakeholders, for a multi-day workshop. The length of the workshop depends on the number of species to be assessed, but on average, 40-60 species can be assessed each day during a workshop. The workshop ends with the discussion of recommendations and of the next steps needed for implementing those conservation actions. Using the online process, assessors generally work in isolation from each other, and undertake their assessments online, in their own time. The combined assessments from multiple individual assessors are consolidated into a single set of assessments for each country.

An online assessment for all species in a particular country requires considerable planning and monitoring by the host (usually the ASG Chair). It involves the following activities:

- Determine the list of assessors required to assess all species in the country, and ensure they have all registered online.
- Actively encourage assessors to complete their assessments according to a pre-determined timeframe.
- Encourage assessors to review species in that country which have been added by other assessors, and to contact those assessors if they have concerns with their data.
- Consider a physical or web-based meeting (such as Skype) once or twice during the assessment timeframe to help with any questions, keep the momentum going, and to ensure that no one is falling behind. AArk staff are happy to join these Skype calls if we can be of help - we have English and Spanish-speaking facilitators who can provide help and support.
- ASG Chair(s) or National Facilitator reviews and approves all assessments.
- Review species that have not yet been assessed, and encourage assessors to add data for those species.

Moving forward, we plan to work closer with the ASG to advance other *ex situ*-related issues within the ASG, and to focus na-



Amphibian Conservation Needs Assessments

Identifying priority species for conservation actions



tional ASG members on a wider range of *ex situ* activities during and after the assessments.

The online program is currently available in both English and Spanish, with a French version to be made available soon. Other languages may be added in the future as the need arises and as funding is available for translation.

LINKS TO OTHER AMPHIBIAN CONSERVATION DATA

The online assessment program includes links to Red List assessments and distribution maps, AmphibiaWeb species accounts and photos from the CalPhotos photo database, where these exist. Having access to these additional data sources can be very helpful when completing assessments, or as an additional reference, and we hope that over time, additional connections will be made with other databases. We hope that eventually all relevant amphibian conservation databases will be accessible from a single data portal.

We would also like to create additional linkages with the IUCN Red List so that Red List categories in our assessments can be automatically updated, and our assessments can be incorporated into the Conservation Actions section of Red List assessments. We also plan to continue discussions with the Amphibian Red List Authority regarding increased links between our respective data, and readily available access to both Conservation Needs Assessments and Red List assessments from the same location, making it easier for assessors to contribute to both types of assessments at the same time.

Amphibian Ark has partnered with AmphibiaWeb to share and provide access to each others' data, and in the coming months, completed Conservation Needs Assessment data will be available from within AmphibiaWeb species accounts.

CHALLENGES AND EVALUATION

The migration of the workshop-based Conservation Needs Assessment process to an online format has many advantages, including cost-effectiveness, ability for multiple countries to hold concurrent assessments, more inclusive access and immediate updating of and access to data, but this format also brings new challenges. Some of these challenges include access to the internet; assessors finding time to make their assessments; working in isolation, as compared to working in a workshop-based environment; and less stakeholder involvement.

We will continue to work with national ASG Chairs to help plan the assessments for their respective countries, and will continue to facilitate the process itself, albeit remotely in most cases. Sharing

the AArk staff's experience and expertise in the assessment process will provide expert guidance with online assessments.

Evaluation of the success of migration to an online format will be based on how well the application is received and used by assessors and national facilitators, the number of new assessments made, and the solutions to the challenges mentioned above. AArk staff will document the progress of the application every three months during the next year to evaluate how effective this new format has been, and the results of this will help guide how conservation needs assessments are made over the coming years.

SHORT-TERM PLANS

We have a target of completing approximately 1,200 species in Madagascar, Colombia and Europe before the end of 2015, using both the English and Spanish versions of the program. As each of these national/regional assessments are complete, we will survey all assessors and national facilitators involved with them and solicit their feedback on using the program, the resulting recommended conservation actions, the content in the help pages, and the review and approval process. We will also ask for any suggested additions and improvements. We are planning to increase the number of national assessments after the end of this year, and will work with national ASG chairs to plan assessments for their countries and regions. If you are interested in planning for a national amphibian assessment, please contact us at info@conservationneeds.org.

The online program and databases have been developed in such a way that the basic structure can be readily modified to suit other classes of animals apart from amphibians. We hope to work with other IUCN taxonomic specialist groups to determine if the assessment program meets their needs, and we hope that in the future this assessment process will be adopted by other specialist groups.

Amphibian Ark would like to thank the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria, the Zoo and Aquarium Association and the Association of Zoos and Aquariums for their generous and ongoing support of the development costs of the online assessments program. In addition, the following volunteers have generously given their free time to help with the development of the extensive help pages, translation into Spanish and French and creating the new Conservation Needs Assessments logo: Danny Beckwith, Manuel Beterams, Luis Carrillo, Olivier Marquis, Belén Proaño and Karin Schwartz.

Please visit the new online assessment program at www.ConservationNeeds.org and if you have any questions about Conservation Needs Assessments, please contact info@conservationneeds.org.

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