



Rescue Team Evacuates World’s Last Few Loa Water Frogs from Perilously Dry Habitat in Chile

International Wildlife Organizations Call on Chilean Government to Continue Remarkable Efforts By Abolishing Illegal Water Extraction and Protecting Frogs’ Wild Home



A healthy Loa water frog in 2015 (left), compared to the malnourished Loa water frogs (right) rescued this month from their dried-up habitat in Chile and taken to the National Zoo of Chile to be nursed back to health. (Left photo by Claudio Soto Azat. Right photo by the Ministry of Housing and Urbanism of Chile)

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As part of an unprecedented and swift rescue mission, a team of conservationists and government officials in Chile have evacuated what may be the world’s last-known 14 Loa water frogs (*Telmatobius dankoi*)—a species considered critically endangered by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™ and found only in a single stream in Chile—just before their habitat dries up almost completely from the illegal extraction of water, leaving the frogs malnourished and barely hanging on.

“I have been deeply impressed by the skill and resolve of the team in Chile acting to prevent the extinction of this species,” said Helen Meredith, executive director of the Amphibian Survival Alliance, which is financially supporting the rescue efforts. “So many critically endangered amphibian species risk slipping away unnoticed because they do not have an active group of people committed to their survival. This gives me great hope

for the Loa water frogs—they face an uncertain future but have a group of champions committed to their survival.”

As part of the rescue mission, the animals have been relocated to the National Zoo of Chile, where the zoo’s specialists are trying to nurse them back to health and are talking to water frog experts around the world for tips on how best to care for and eventually breed them. A number of international wildlife organizations—including Amphibian Ark, the IUCN SSC Amphibian Specialist Group, the Amphibian Survival Alliance and Global Wildlife Conservation—are [calling on the government of Chile](#) to continue this great work by now protecting and restoring the frogs’ home in the wild.

In late June a team of conservationists, government officials and indigenous leaders discovered that the habitat of the Loa water frog outside of the city of Calama, located in the middle of the Atacama desert, had dried up as the result of extraction of water for mining, agriculture and real estate development, in a region where water is a scarce resource. All of the frogs had been pushed into a tiny pool of muddy water. The team collected the last 14 individuals and brought them to the National Zoo of Chile to start a conservation breeding program.

“The first big challenge is to help these frogs survive and while the rescue was the best chance to save the Loa water frog, there are always risks with trying to care for a new species—especially when the animals are already struggling,” said Alejandra Montalba, director of the National Zoo of Chile, which belongs to the Metropolitan Park of Santiago, a public service of Chile’s Ministry of Housing and Urbanism. “That’s the main goal right now, and later we need to be able to breed them. But ultimately we need to work very hard to restore their environment because it’s pointless to breed them if they don’t have a home to go back to in the wild.”

The international conservation community is ready to help, and specifically encouraging the Chilean government to halt the activities that are threatening the Loa water frog, to restore its habitat and formally protect it as a sanctuary or reserve that is regularly monitored.

“We request that consideration be given to the development of an emergency plan for the protection and recovery of Loa frog habitat,” said Jon Paul Rodríguez, chair of the IUCN Species Survival Commission. “For this reason, we call for the establishment of a technical working group, to assist the work in this matter.”

There are at least 63 known species of water frogs, or *Telmatobius* species, found from Ecuador to Chile, including in Peru, Bolivia and Argentina. Many of these species, like the Loa water frog, are microendemic, which means they live in just one small place. Water frogs are semi-aquatic or entirely aquatic, making them very sensitive to any changes in their environment. Habitat destruction, pollution, disease and invasive trout

are among the biggest threats they face. About 10 species of water frog live in Chile, and many of them are likely facing the same threats as the Loa water frog.

Perhaps the most well-known individual water frog is [Romeo](#), a Sehuencas water frog from Bolivia and [formerly the world's loneliest frog](#). The Sehuencas water frog team at the Museo de Historia Natural Alcide d'Orbigny, where Romeo lives, has been among the experts helping to advise the National Zoo of Chile. In addition, Romeo has [written a letter](#) to the Loa water frogs at the National Zoo in Chile encouraging them not to lose hope, and [narrated a video about their plight](#). Global Wildlife Conservation is asking individuals around the world to spread the word about the Loa water frogs using the hashtags #SaveTheLoaFrog and #SalvemosLasRanitasDelLoa to show international support for the frogs.