
Amphibians and reptiles declining: habitat management guidelines available

Frogs, turtles, snakes, and other amphibians and reptiles are in decline in the United States and worldwide, largely because of the loss or degradation of habitat.

Often misunderstood and feared, reptiles and amphibians have been dubbed the aquatic “canary of the coal mine” because they reveal subtle declines in environmental health.

Large habitat areas that once provided varied habitats “herps” need at different times of the year have become fragmented, and new barriers, such as highways, become great risks. For example, a new road can keep a snake from reaching its hibernation den or a salamander from getting to its breeding pond.

A series of regional habitat management guidelines are available to resource managers and private landowners who may not have thought about the perils facing herps, but have a strong desire or feel the obligation to help protect reptiles and amphibians.

Amphibians and reptiles are commonly referred to as cold-blooded; but the fact is, they often do not have cold blood, and some prefer to be warmer than humans. They acquire heat and cold from their environment.

“That’s one reason it’s very difficult to make national guidelines for herp habitats,” says Randy Gray, former National Biologist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and a member of Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (PARC).

Accordingly, PARC has published Southeast, Northeast, Northwest, and Midwest regional guidelines, with a Southwest guide due in 2009. The guides use the best science available to present practical management

ideas and recommendations to landowners and managers to help stem the decline of herp species.

Among the recommendations that apply to habitat management across the country:

- Keep or establish natural vegetation along ponds, streams, wetlands, and crop fields to protect the land and provide food and cover for wildlife.
- Large habitat areas are more valuable to herps than a series of small areas. Keep from fragmenting large areas into small, isolated patches.
- Establish well-vegetated corridors to connect patches of habitat, so herps can travel from one to another with protection.
- Protect and restore wetlands, including seasonal wetlands, some of the most important habitat to amphibians.
- Establish native vegetation in buffer zones around wetlands.
- Leave logs, snags, and other woody debris.
- Leave protective vegetation 50 to 75 feet wide along streams to guard against streambank erosion and provide cover for many herps.
- Do not clear-cut forest, and manage forestland for a diversity of plant habitat with understory.

A number of groups and agencies cooperated in developing and funding a project to print the regional guidelines, according to Ed Hackett, a biologist with the NRCS Agricultural Wildlife Conservation Center (AWCC). One of the PARC partners, the AWCC, located in Madison, Mississippi, is a fish and wildlife technology development center.



NRCS photo by Lynn Betts

Red-eared slider

Summary of:

Agricultural Wildlife Conservation Center
Project Unnumbered

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