

## Responding to the amphibian extinction crisis: Call to Arms for a CBSG/WAZA Amphibian Initiative



Date : 11 Oct 2005  
To: Leaders of CBSG and WAZA  
From: Bob Lacy  
Re: Responding to the amphibian extinction crisis

As I think you all know, the need for the zoo and aquarium community to play a significant role in the efforts to stem the losses of amphibian species due to chytrid fungus and other immediate threats was highlighted at several regional zoo association meetings, at the CBSG Steering Committee meeting in Melbourne, at a follow-up open discussion session in Melbourne, and at the recent CBSG Steering Committee in Syracuse. In each of these forums, there was broad recognition that the CBSG, the zoo associations (WAZA and the regional associations), and the individual zoos and aquariums had to take a strong role in responding to the need for urgent action in amphibian conservation. The CBSG consequently convened a small international meeting in August to discuss the role of zoos and aquariums in responding to the amphibian crisis, and we participated (as did a number of individual zoos and aquariums) in the September "Amphibian Conservation Summit" organized by the SSC and Conservation International. The Declaration from that Summit included a call for the establishment of *ex situ* species assurance populations for amphibian species and populations facing imminent threat of extinction.

A working group at the recent CBSG Annual Meeting addressed both what broad strategies could be taken by the zoo and aquarium community, and what specific role CBSG and its partners should fill. Several key recommendations came from that working group and were endorsed by the plenary of the CBSG meeting. Among these were:

- 1) a call for a workshop to be convened as soon as practical to develop a manual or set of guidelines about the "best practices" with respect to facilities, husbandry, population management, disease management and other aspects of implementation of captive assurance colonies for amphibians;
- 2) the need for CBSG and its partners to quickly employ an expert to help promote and coordinate our efforts on behalf of amphibians.

It was recognized that these efforts and indeed the full range of our responses to the amphibian conservation needs would be most effective if they were conducted as a coordinated partnership among CBSG and WAZA. Each of the two organizations has its particular strengths and abilities to provide leadership to zoos and aquariums. (All of our work needs also to be coordinated to the extent possible with work on captive and other aspects of amphibian conservation by the Amphibian Specialist Group, the SSC and other components of the IUCN, conservation NGOs, and governmental authorities.) The roles and activities of both CBSG and WAZA (and its various committees) continue to evolve, but I think that it would be a fair (even if perhaps simplified) characterization to say that CBSG is focused on providing technical expertise and

facilitation to help partners plan and initiate needed conservation programs, WAZA provides coordination among regions and helps to identify and stimulate effective conservation by zoos and aquariums globally, and the national and regional associations and their member institutions will be the primary implementers of the conservation work by the *ex situ* community.

At the WAZA conference, George Rabb made a presentation about the amphibian crisis, and a number of informal discussions about the issues continued in the hallways and meeting rooms. Maria Clara Dominguez offered to host the workshop that had been recommended at the CBSG meeting, and Alex Rubel and a few others quickly obtained verbal commitments from a number of zoos to provide funding for this workshop and for hiring a coordinator for our efforts. I am delighted with the rapid and positive response that we received from so many in the CBSG and WAZA meetings, and I thank Alex and Maria Clara for their outstanding contributions to the effort!

As indicated by Alex, Maria Clara, and Onnie, both the workshop and the coordinator could be joint initiatives of WAZA and CBSG – as the workshop and coordinator would probably serve well the overlapping needs of WAZA and CBSG as we work to respond appropriately to the amphibian crisis. However, there could be other ideas about how we should proceed. I feel that I know what are the needs and capabilities of the CBSG, but I don't want to try to speak for WAZA. I would like to provide here a summary of the needs and opportunities that I see from the CBSG side. I then hope that all of you can provide your perspectives and let us know what will work best for WAZA and your zoos.

With respect to the planned workshop, the CBSG is prepared to help with planning, to help identify the participants, to provide facilitation at the workshop, and prepare the final report. However, I think that the workshop should be clearly seen to be a joint effort by various partners, and not purely a "CBSG workshop". The output of the workshop will be a contribution of all participants, and shouldn't be seen as being owned by CBSG or any one organization.

With respect to an amphibian conservation coordinator, there are a number of reasons that the CBSG needs to have someone working to help us to accomplish what I see as the minimum response that we can ethically make to amphibian conservation. Our immediate needs include:

- 1) coordination of logistics for the planned workshop
- 2) compilation of materials on *ex situ* methods for amphibian conservation, to be used as the background materials for the workshop
- 3) editing of the workshop report
- 4) communication within and outside of the CBSG network about amphibian issues – including distribution of reports about prior meetings, compilation and distribution of scientific and conservation papers, and keeping people

informed about ongoing initiatives

5) communication and coordination with other aspects of the SSC Amphibian Conservation Action Plan (still in draft form) – including close coordination with the SSC, ASG, and other partners

6) convening of working groups (whether as meetings or as email discussions or in some other forum) to move toward establishing a coordinated network, with an effective administration and within an appropriate organizational framework (still to be defined), to implement the *ex situ* component of the Amphibian Conservation Action Plan (ACAP).

As indicated in #6 above, the coordinator needed by the CBSG is a short-term position to keep us moving toward the much greater response that is needed. To implement the *ex situ* response components of the ACAP (including emergency response teams able to work with field researchers to rescue critical populations in on-site, temporary facilities; development of more permanent breeding facilities in the countries of origin; and management of multi-species breeding centers at several locations around the world) will require a considerable new organizational structure, capable of managing multiple facilities, a number of staff, training programs, communication and education, and many partnerships. It may take us up to a year to determine what organizational structure will be charged with implementing a coordinated plan, and to find funding for it. Implementation of a large-scale conservation program is clearly outside of the expertise or role of the CBSG, but we can and need to hire a coordinator to help make sure that the zoo and aquarium community is making progress toward the scale and kind of program that is needed.

Neither I nor the existing CBSG staff have the expertise or time that is needed to complete the tasks listed above. I am guessing that we need someone working perhaps 50% for one year on these tasks. I do not know if the roles I list above match closely with tasks that WAZA would identify. I can see several possible options and opportunities for how we can work together:

- a) a half-time coordinator, focused on the above issues, works jointly for CBSG and WAZA;
- b) a full-time coordinator working on behalf of WAZA and CBSG completes the tasks listed above and additional tasks that WAZA and others would identify;
- c) CBSG hires a half-time coordinator to complete the above tasks, and WAZA coordinates its involvement in the amphibian conservation activities by using existing staff or members or by hiring its own coordinator.

No matter which option is chosen, I see the need and opportunity for CBSG and WAZA to work closely together. However, I think that we do need to make a decision about how we will work together before we raise the funds to proceed. Alex suggested that an MOU might be the best way to document our working arrangement. I am hoping that we can quickly discuss and come to agreement on what would be in such an MOU.

If we choose option (c) above, then we need only to continue to communicate about our activities, so that the work by the

two organizations is complementary and not duplicative or missing critical components. If we choose (a) or (b), as I think Alex *et al.*, are suggesting in their memo, then there are a handful of issues that I think we need to address:

- 1) Who would be the legal employer of the coordinator?
- 2) To what account would funds supporting the workshop and coordinator be deposited? (The Global Conservation Network – financial managers for CBSG – could easily set up a restricted account for this purpose, just as they did for managing some special funds for CBSG-South Asia, CBSG-Southern Africa, and the SSC.)
- 3) Where would the person be located? (I don't think that this matters very much. The activities identified above will require global communications, but can be completed from almost anywhere.)
- 4) Who would supervise the coordinator? (I think that we can and should hire someone with sufficient expertise so that very little supervision is necessary. I also feel that we need to give the person considerable flexibility to do the assigned tasks, without needing to check back with a board or boards before actions can be taken. We cannot let the complexities of a joint CBSG-WAZA position, with multiple overseers, get in the way of someone who should be providing leadership to us on amphibian issues.)
- 5) What reporting mechanisms will we want for keeping CBSG, WAZA, and all of our partners well informed about joint and individual activities? (If we develop a joint initiative, I would suggest that we simply have the coordinator submit reports at least monthly to all parties.)

I am eager to hear your ideas on the above issues and proposals. I don't want to lose the momentum from the CBSG and WAZA conferences, so I think that (at least from the CBSG's side) we want to make decisions and move ahead within a week or two. Finally, I will mention that several people at the meetings and subsequently have enthusiastically recommended a person – Dr. Kevin Zippel for the position of coordinator. Kevin is a highly respected expert on captive husbandry of amphibians, he has worked with the Panama Golden Frog project and with other projects that integrate captive and field conservation efforts, and he is an excellent spokesperson for amphibian conservation. He is currently teaching at a university, but he would be available immediately to provide about 50% effort on coordinating amphibian conservation. By 2006, he might be able to devote full-time effort, as he could step away from his teaching position at that time if other opportunities existed.

Thank you for helping us meet our responsibilities to 1000s of amphibian species!

