

Interested in becoming a citizen scientist?

By JOSH REAM

For logical reasons game and subsistence species receive most of the research and management funding in Alaska. The majority of life on earth however is considered "non-game" but many of these species are critical components of ecosystems and ultimately impact the wildlife on which people depend for survival. While these animals may not have a recognized economic value, they often provide recreational and aesthetic services to communities. After all, what kid doesn't enjoy catching frogs, salamanders, insects and other critters that are commonly encountered on the landscape? Sometimes these animals even play an important role in culture, the frog's relationship to the local Kiks.adi clan of the Stikine Tlingit being but one example.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) does not have a committed non-game program, yet projects related to these animals in recent years have been almost entirely funded by the federal State Wildlife Grants program which is slated to be eliminated from the budget entirely this year. This will undoubtedly impact the availability of basic information for a variety of species, information that is already limited and unavailable to inform responsible management. Alternative sources of acquiring this knowledge may then be necessary to circumvent the fiscal and logistical challenges to research that compound the situation in our state. One possible solution is the use of local knowledge and citizen science within our communities.

Citizen science is an emerging tool that is becoming increasingly popular in the study of game and non-game species alike. It makes sense that the people on the ground, that survive from day to day on a local landscape, will know more about what is there and what the issues are than a scientist who visits a locality periodically and has but

little interaction with local people. The Audubon Society has been incredibly successful in promoting avian programs such as the Christmas Bird Count and the Backyard Bird Count, initiatives that have expanded our knowledge of birds in North America tremendously. These programs serve to not only involve non-scientists in the research and management of their own resources but also to promote education, outreach and increased recognition of environmental ethics. In addition, these programs help to get children and adults alike outside, learning about the world around them.

As part of my doctoral dissertation research I am exploring the capacity of local knowledge of non-game species to inform the research and management of these animals. One component of this study involves a citizen science initiative that is currently underway. Over the next couple of months a binder will be placed into each of the twenty-three US Forest Service public guest cabins in the Wrangell Ranger District. These include colorful field guides, laminated flash cards, observation pages and other informative materials that can assist anyone willing to contribute in identifying the amphibian species that they may encounter. Whether your observations are accidental or you actively take your children out to explore the smaller animals of our amazing forests and wetlands, please consider taking notes on what you find.

Many people do not realize that there are at least six species of native amphibians that inhabit the region including the Wood Frog, Boreal Toad, Columbia Spotted Frog, Rough-skinned Newt, Long-toed Salamander and Northwestern Salamander. Though it may be rare to find some of these, others occur in relative abundance and you are likely to have seen them along the river or on Wrangell itself. These animals help to control

pest insect populations such as mosquitoes and provide an ample food source for fish, birds and small mammals. The best chance of encountering amphibians is during the spring when they move to wetlands to breed or alternatively in mid-late summer as their young begin to emerge from the water as adults. For frogs, especially the Wood Frog, keep your ears open in the next few weeks and you may hear what sounds like a group of ducks... Quite possibly this is actually the mating call of frogs. Looking for and listening to amphibians can be an especially fun and educational activity for Wrangell's youth.

The most important thing to remember is that amphibians are very sensitive to even small changes in their environment and that their populations are declining worldwide for a variety of known and unknown reasons. It is both illegal and unethical to take native amphibians from their homes as removing even one breeding adult can have major impacts for the entire local population. It is equally damaging to release non-native amphibians such as the Bull Frog which compete for the same resources and are often aggressive toward the native species. We encourage all citizen scientists to observe and appreciate what they find at the location where it was found, leaving that animal in place to breed and contribute to the next generation.

I want to thank everyone that has made this project possible, especially the Wrangell Sentinel,

the US Forest Service and the Kiks.adi Clan of the Stikine Tlingit who have contributed so very much. Wrangell has displayed incredible hospitality and is becoming my second home. I invite everyone to take part in this program, to learn about local amphibians and to enjoy the many services provided to us by non-game species. Please feel free to contact me with any questions, comments or concerns that you may have.

Become a Citizen Scientist!



Help us to learn about Alaska's amphibians by making observational contributions. Look inside to learn how!

The 'Citizen Scientist' binder will be available at local Forest Service cabins this summer.

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