



ASSOCIATION of
FISH & WILDLIFE
AGENCIES

AMPHIBIAN & REPTILE CONSERVATION COMMITTEE

Chair: David Golden (NJ)

Vice-Chair: Becky Gwynn (VA)

September 23, 2025

1:15 pm – 4:15 pm

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AFWA Annual Meeting Conference

Tucson, Arizona

Room: See Whova App

Agenda

- 1:15 pm Call to Order / Introductions / Agenda Review
David Golden, New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection
- 1:20 Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (PARC) Updates
Michelle Christman, US Fish and Wildlife Service, virtual pre-recorded update
DOD PARC updates mission sensitive priority species
Disease Task Team – webinar series, all previous webinars are recorded and posted on website; Next webinar is on Nov 14 focused on Emydomyces
Ethical Herping and Observation Standards – ethical herping tenants for observing herps for recreational purposes
Amphibian Week May 3-9, 2026 – Theme: At home in a habitat: here, there, everywhere
PARC undergoing strategic evaluation and planning:
- *Ongoing facilitated evaluation/planning for greater strategic focus.*
 - *Upcoming virtual workshop to identify major conservation barriers and priority strategies.*
 - *Reliance on volunteers, lack of dedicated staffing and funding noted as core challenges*
- 1:35 ARC Update
JJ Apodaca, Executive Director, Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy
- **ARC's Role:** *Nonprofit sponsor for PARC and CCITT; also rapidly growing on-the-ground conservation organization.*
 - **Priority Amphibian & Reptile Conservation Areas (PARCAs):**

- Expanded from one SE region in 2016 to nearly national as of 2025 (now including Alaska, soon Utah).
- 322 areas identified; 22 active programs with full-time staff for restoration, headstarting, surveys.
- **On-the-Ground Achievements:**
 - Over 1,000 sites, 12,000 surveys in 2024.
 - 121 partnerships in 2024 (54 state/fed, others NGO/private).
 - 10 national partnerships focused on science/capacity (e.g., repatriation/headstarting databases).
- **Emphasis Areas:**
 - Private land engagement: Working Lands for Wildlife, new NRCS aquatic framework coordinator, leveraging Farm Bill funds.
 - Assisted migration/reintroduction projects (e.g., gopher frogs, flatwoods salamanders).
 - Imperiled species intervention (e.g., 1,654 headstarts of highly threatened species in 2024).
- **Organizational Growth:**
 - Over 600% growth in income and assets in past two years.
 - Noted for tech support/coordination (e.g., for farm programs, data sharing).
- **Partner Support:** Willingness to leverage resources for the community, maintain role as fiscal agent for national PARC/CCITT.

Massive funding and net asset growth over the past 2 years. ARC did get a big RCPP this year, but it was rescinded, so our efforts with Agriculture and Farm Bill is all

1:50

CCITT Update

Brooke Talley, CCITT Coordinator and Turtle Conservation and Policy Directory, ARC

- **Mission & Structure:** Grassroots coalition of professionals focused on turtle trafficking, composed of biologists, LE officers, federal staff, NGOs, zoos.
- **Working Groups:** 5 active WGs; all members can join meetings.
- **Trafficking Trends & Media Coverage:**
 - Two major recent cases:
 - Chinese national pled guilty to exporting 850 turtles disguised as toys over 1 year (US-based).
 - 419 turtles confiscated in Hong Kong, mislabeled as clothing/toys/food.
 - Most trafficked: box turtles (with shift from eastern to ornate/three-toed due to rarity), spotted, wood, mud, musk, Blanding's, snapping, and softshell turtles.
- **Federal Case Limitation:** Policy restricts DOJ prosecution of wildlife trafficking without illegal immigration tie; states encouraged to pursue state-level charges.
- **Policy/Legislative Action:**
 - Colorado passed a comprehensive wildlife trafficking bill: New biologist and LE FTEs, new tech positions, increased penalties, but funding challenges remain.
 - Other states facing legal limitations in prosecuting violations across state borders; need for Lacey Act-like provisions for domestic endangered species violations flagged.
- **Recent Initiatives:**
 - Finalized CCITT Strategic Plan (five goals covering working group areas).
 - Law enforcement engagement and challenge coin program.

- Replacement Value Document developed for use in prosecution, quantifying per-turtle costs for confiscation/care.
- **Upcoming Initiatives:**
 - Law enforcement training on turtle crime (early 2026).
 - Site sensitivity guidance for sharing field location data to prevent poaching.
 - Ongoing survey of state readiness/willingness to accept repatriated turtles.
- **Capacity Loss at Federal Level:** Shrinking staff and expertise, states expected to fill gaps; coordination with AFWA and committee chair advised.
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Q&A:

The estimated replacement cost is for mostly healthy turtles

What's the purpose of the trade, food or pet? Mostly pet trade, in other cultures, they are signs of prosperity etc.

With federal staffing and other fed changes, what do states need to do? Work with AFWA to figure out how to deal with it—if there is important work that needs to be done with CCITT (and other), those gaps need to get elevated so the directors can discuss it and try to fill the gap.

What is the bottleneck to repatriate the turtles? CITES permits is a big one

2:05 Turtle Trafficking and Repatriation: Proactive state actions
 Kevin Oxenrider, Amphibian and Reptile Program Leader, West Virginia Division of
 Natural Resources

Current Crisis:

- 1,000 turtles being held in AZA (Association of Zoos and Aquariums) and related facilities, some for years, awaiting health/genetic clearance and conservation decision.
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- holding facilities lack funding for care, testing.
- Enforcement actions constrained by lack of placement options.
- **Bottlenecks:**
 - Disease and genetic testing slow and expensive; formerly paid by competitive state wildlife grants ("comp SWIG"), now funding limited or unavailable.
 - States are not uniformly committed to accepting repatriated animals, further slowing releases.
 - Some states/individuals overly cautious regarding disease/genetics—calls for more balanced, risk-tolerant approach given magnitude of trafficking crisis.
- **Requests/Proposals:**
 - Urgent need for stable, pooled funding for disease testing (estimate: at least \$100,000/year across states).
 - Urge states to make prompt, clear decisions about animal acceptance.
 - Collective negotiated rates with regional wildlife disease centers.
 - Need for clarity on definitions for repatriation eligibility based on health/genetics.

- *Encourage inclusion of these needs (testing, repatriation, confiscation response) in State Wildlife Action Plans to secure future SWG funding.*
- **Practical State Actions:**
 - *Assess native disease prevalence—important for release risk assessments.*
 - *Develop soft-release/acclimation enclosures.*
 - *Run small-scale pilot repatriation studies to build capacity/confidence.*
- **Pipeline Survey:** *Upcoming CCITT survey to all states re: animal acceptance criteria—prompt responses requested.*
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Q&A:

How can we elevate this to get to the level of the directors, managers on the ground need more clear guidance of what states are willing to do, are states willing to take repatriated turtles

To start the conversation, 100k is a good and have zero dollars in competitive SWG, and need coverage; AZA facilities have 1000+ facilities and are wanting to offload

Lab limitations or any lab with the ability can do it? Yes any lab.

Event in TX to surrender Texas tortoise (amnesia day) – expected 30, got 172 confiscations; how are we going to deal with diseases that are more novel or rare, what is negative micoplasma, really? Prevalence testing is really important bc wild populations might already have certain diseases, so it wouldn't be a big deal if a repatriated turtle has it

Put in disease testing a repatriation in SWAPs! That way you can earmark \$ for it! Having pooled funds would be very helpful to help with any big busts that might happen or come down

2:25

Snake Fungal Disease Updates

Ellen Haynes, SEAFWA Regional Wildlife Health Coordinator & Asst. Research Scientist, University of Georgia

- Ophidiomyces ophidiicola established as main cause of snake fungal disease (Ophidiomycosis—SFD) since 1945; recently, other fungi (Paranannizziopsis) also implicated in similar disease patterns.
- **Epidemiology and Spread:**
 - Ophidiomycosis now documented widely in US, Canada, Europe, China/Taiwan, with potential in S. America/Indonesia.
 - Detected in >60 snake species (9 families); likely no taxon is immune.
- **Clinical & Conservation Impact:**
 - Disease can cause crusts, ulcers, sometimes deep invasion and secondary infection.
 - Not always highly lethal, but can impede feeding and lead to mutilation or death.
- **Other Snake Pathogens:**
 - Ranavirus: Now identified in North American snakes, though prevalence may be underappreciated.
 - Serpentoviruses: Linked to respiratory disease, especially in pythons, now found in invasive populations (e.g., Burmese pythons in Florida).
 - Pentastome parasites: Invasive species (Raillietiella orientalis) spreading northward from Florida, likely introduced by Burmese pythons.
- **Management:**

- Antifungal treatments for individuals available but lengthy/difficult.
- Environmental decontamination is challenging; biosecurity measures and disinfection protocols recommended.
- **Regional Surveillance** (CA example): 25/628 snakes positive for SFD in 2019-2025 sampling.

Q&A:

Where to focus on swabbing – entire body, then focus on the lesions itself. 4 sides of the body, tail, head, and lesions

2:45 Arizona Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Update
Audrey Owens, Ranid Frogs Project Coordinator, Arizona Game and Fish Department

- **Team Structure:** 7 FTEs (including manager, species leads, scientific activities admin), 2–4 summer interns; additional project staff via contract branch.
- **Species Diversity:** 139 native herps (49 lizards, 24 frogs/toads, 58 snakes, 13 rattlesnakes, 7 turtles).
- **Main Threats:**
 - Urbanization, water withdrawal, invasive plants (fueling especially Sonoran Desert grassification/fires), and invasive aquatic species (bullfrogs, non-native crayfish).
 - Established chytridiomycosis/ranavirus; snake fungal disease not yet detected in wild AZ snakes.
 - Climate change accelerating all above.
- **Key Projects:**
 - Long-term monitoring: Sonoran desert tortoise (35 yrs of data; stable pops).
 - Yellow mud turtle: Telemetry, summer rain/ephemeral tank use.
 - Garter snakes (two ESA-listed): Headstarting and reintroduction.
 - Ridge-nosed rattlesnake: Cross-jurisdictional, US-Mexico reintroduction, captive breeding.
 - Arizona toad: Five-year monitoring/SSA underway.
 - Ranid frog recovery: Multi-species releases/translocations, habitat/water management, bullfrog eradication.
- **Regulatory Engagement:** Input on licensing, take, and enforcement rules.
- **Outreach/Publications:** TV and print; published/revised field guides; manage reptilesfaz.org.
- **SWAP & Funding:** Use of heritage/check-off SWIG funds, project contracts.

3:05 Brown Treesnake Management in Guam update
Jeffrey Quitugua, Assistant Chief, Division of Aquatics and Wildlife Resources,
Government of Guam

- **Background:** Brown tree snake (*Boiga irregularis*) introduced post-WWII; severe ecological, economic, and health impacts.
- **Ecological impacts:** ~Complete extirpation/extinction of many native birds, severe predation on small mammals, economic losses due to power outages and equipment loss, pet predation, human (especially infant) envenomations.
- **Control Strategies:**

- **Nest Tree Barriers:** Electrified barriers prevent snake predation of remnant Mariana crows.
- **Minnow Traps:** Mouse-baited traps for juveniles/small snakes; not effective for large snakes.
- **Nocturnal Surveys:** Most efficient way to remove snakes at high densities.
- **Community Mobilization:** Friends of Isla Donna—a volunteer group; effective for small-island eradication (e.g., Cocos Island).
- **Public Education:** Outreach on pet, chicken coop, and property protection; safe snake handling.
- **Eradication Campaigns:** Recent efforts (2019–2025) on Cocos Island (386 ha); 125 snakes removed, target set at 300 for functional eradication to enable kingfisher and rail reintroductions.
- **Critical Partnerships:** USGS, USDA, National Park Service, DoD, and growing local NGO/nonprofit engagement.

Q&A

What is the most efficient method of removing snakes? Right now, its person-searching at night

3:25 Funding the State PARC Coordinator Position Discussion
David Golden , New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection

We had a state coordinator funded through partnership agreements at federal level, and overtime was diminished, and ultimately the coordinator left and we are left with a gap. Trying to figure out how to fund this position. This week, we have talked with directors for how to get funding.

Options:

1. Partnership agreements with USFWS, USGS, etc. but that is a bit uncertain with the
2. Collaborative Conservation Initiative – state pooling funding, the administrative burdens are relaxed; when get SWG apportionment, tell the feds to leave out X dollars for this effort on the front end. CCI's are new and NEAFWA is working on one for the Wildlife Health Coordinator;
 - a. There has been some support from the directors on this idea, it would be ~\$2500/state for each SWG, doesn't have to be equal across all states. Total ask is \$125,000/year Getting positive response.
 - b. Ultimately what would happen – give small survey and give to directors to ask if they are willing to contribute and if so how much.
 - c. Talking to USFWS director to see if there is something we can do there. He seems open to the idea.

We pushed this years ago and AFWA was opposed. What has changed? Concern from AFWA was increasing dues but the CCI allows it to be voluntary and not a dues change.

Amphib and Reptile coordinator or PARC coordinator? The former with job duties on PARC.

The wildlife trafficking side of things is really impactful and of interest for the directors, so that is a great opportunity.

Timeline: survey for states within the next 30 days; sometime beyond 6-months to actually get this in practice

For approval, probably start at 2-year approval, then go from there.

Another option could be non-profit funding. But appears to be some hesitation to open that door; maybe we go around to the states and the states can come up with 75%, then we can consider making up the shortfall with the nonprofit partnership.

3:45 Federal, State, Tribal & Partner Roundtable
 For states: relevant updates on SWAP revisions?

4:15 Wrap up and Adjourn