

## Scientists rush to save an iconic frog from an active volcano in Ecuador

21st January 2016 **Mike Gaworecki**

*The only surviving population of the Quito rocket frog is in danger from the potentially imminent eruption of the Cotopaxi volcano in Ecuador, but scientists aim to pull the frog out of harm's way before it's too late.*

- *No one can say exactly when Volcán Cotopaxi will erupt again, but the volcano remains active ever since it erupted last year for the first time in nearly 140 years.*
- *When Cotopaxi, located about 50km (30 miles) from Quito, Ecuador, does blow again, it will send lava, mud and ash cascading down the Pita River, which runs along the volcano's flank — and that could wipe out one of Ecuador's most endangered frog species.*
- *A team of scientists has already collected 45 tadpoles and taken them to Balsa de los Sapos, an ex situ conservation facility maintained by the Museum of Zoology at the Catholic University of Ecuador.*

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What's certain is that when Cotopaxi, located about 50 kilometers (30 miles) from Quito, Ecuador, does blow again, it will send lava, mud and ash cascading down the Pita River, which runs along the volcano's flank — and that could wipe out one of Ecuador's most endangered frog species.

The only surviving population of the Quito rocket frog (*Hyloxalus jacobuspetersi*) calls the banks of the Pita River home, but scientists aim to pull the frogs out of harm's way before it's too late.

For now, Cotopaxi remains relatively calm, allowing the scientists to carry out their work.

"We are under yellow alert but right now the superficial activity is low," Dr. Santiago Ron, curator of amphibians at Ecuador's Museum of Zoology and a herpetologist at Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador in Quito, told Mongabay. "This will allow us to continue field searches next week."





A Quito rocket frog (*Hyloxalus jacobuspetersi*) at Balsa de los Sapos, an *ex situ* conservation facility for frogs started in 2005 maintained by the Museum of Zoology at the Catholic University of Ecuador. Photo courtesy of Santiago Ron.

Even before this emergency situation, the Quito rocket frog was at a higher risk of extinction than polar bears, pandas, blue whales and other iconic endangered animals, Ron said.

"It is a bit sad that awareness on the possible extinction of this species is null only because they are not cute, large, or furry," he added. "As you can imagine, those features say nothing about the ecological role and general importance of a species in nature."

The Quito rocket frog is small, less than an inch in length, and was once widely distributed across the central and northern Andes of Ecuador. Populations of the frog declined precipitously in the 1980s and 1990s, probably due to disease and climate change, according to the [Amphibian Survival Alliance](#), which launched an [adopt-a-tadpole](#) campaign to help fund the rescue efforts.

In fact, scientists hadn't recorded evidence of the frog since 1989 — until the one remaining population on the banks of the Pita River was discovered in 2008.



The frog's habitat on the Pita River. Photo courtesy of Santiago Ron.

Now, the species that was once believed to have already gone extinct is staring down annihilation once again. Dr. Ron and a team of scientists are collecting individual Quito rocket frogs and tadpoles from the Pita River and moving them to a lab at Balsa de los Sapos, an *ex situ* conservation facility for frogs started in 2005 maintained by the Museum of Zoology at the Catholic University of Ecuador.

The team has collected 45 of the 100 tadpoles they plan to rescue. A few have already reached metamorphosis, and the froglets appear to be healthy, Dr. Ron reports.

The frogs will be returned to the wild as soon as it is feasible to do so. If their habitat is destroyed, the frogs may be kept at Balsa de los Sapos for several years, according to Ron. If the breeding program is successful, the frog will also be reintroduced in other locations where populations went extinct decades ago.

It's probably the least we humans can do for the frogs, considering we caused them to be in such dire circumstances in

the first place.

"If we let these frogs go extinct, it won't be the result of natural causes," Don Church, executive director of the ASA, said in a statement.

"The reality is that human-driven changes in the environment forced this species to hang out on the edge of a volcano."