



**UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
ENDANGERED SPECIES PROGRAM**

TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW Time (5:46)

HOUSTON TOAD (HOST – SARAH LEON WITH PAIGE NAJVAR)

This transcript was produced from audio provided by FWS Endangered Species Program

P R O C E E D I N G S

(Music plays.)

MS. LEON: Hello there, this is Sarah Leon for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and I'm on the phone today with Paige Najvar, Fish and Wildlife Biologist at the Austin Ecological Services Field Office. Hi, Paige, how are you today?

MS. NAJVAR: Fine, how are you?

MS. LEON: I'm doing well, thanks. I was hoping that you could tell us a little about the Houston toad today.

MS. NAJVAR: Okay.

MS. LEON: All right. What can you tell us about this species?

MS. NAJVAR: Well, the Houston toad was really listed as an endangered species in October 1970. It was actually one of the first amphibians to be added to a list of threatened and endangered species.

It only occurs in a handful of counties in Texas. It is known to depend on healthy and mature forest ecosystems with significant canopy cover and a fairly open understory component. It also requires ponds or other small water bodies with shaded cover for its breeding habitat.

There isn't anything remarkable about the appearance of the Houston toad. It is similar in appearance to a couple of the other toad species that occur within its range, including the

Gulf Coast toad and Woodhouse's toad.

Houston toads can be distinguished by these species by its underside which is usually pale with dark spots. Male Houston Toads have dark throats which is another unique physical marker. The coloration on the rest of its body can vary considerably from one individual to another.

MS. LEON: All right. And I understand the Houston toad has been eliminated from a significant portion of its modest range in the last 30 years. Paige, can you tell us what's going on?

MS. NAJVAR: Sure. Well, I mentioned that the Houston toad depends on mature forest ecosystems to survive. Destruction, fragmentation and degradation of these forest habitats are the most serious threats facing the Houston toad.

This species is rarely found far from a forest's edge. So, expensive clearing of native vegetation either for urbanization or for the conversion of woodlands to agriculture use is extremely detrimental to the Houston Toad. Its habitat has also been negatively impacted by fire suppression throughout its range. The lack of fire has increased understories in the forest it's known to occupy.

This dense vegetation prohibits Houston toad movement and dispersable abilities. It also alters the abundance and diversity of insect populations which comprise the Houston Toad's prey base.

The Houston toad was first discovered in the 1950s and since that time we found its range included about 11 counties stretching from the Houston area to the City of Bastrop in Texas. However, it is now only found in a few counties in east central Texas. And the largest remaining Houston Toad populations are found in the Lost Pines Region of Bastrop County, but even those are experiencing rapid decline.

MS. LEON: So, can you tell us about some of the conservation actions that are currently underway?

MS. NAJVAR: Sure. Most of the land in Texas is privately owned. This includes the areas considered to be Houston toad habitat. For that reason, we are focusing a lot of attention on engaging private landowners to participate in the Houston toad conservation.

We are doing this by holding a variety of workshops that provide information on land management, financial incentives and technical assistance programs that are available.

We also offer information on various permitting options for landowners including the Loss Time Habitat Conservation Plan. This covers forestry wildlife and agricultural practices throughout most of Bastrop County.

Safe harbor agreements have also been instrumental in generating landowners' interest in

Houston toad conservation. We are currently working to develop a programmatic safe harbor agreement that will cover a wide variety of Houston code management activities throughout the entire reign of the species.

Another component of Houston toad recovery is the head-starting program that was initiated in 2007 through our partnerships with the Houston Zoo and Texas State University.

Head-starting refers to the concept of collecting individuals of a particular life stage, usually at a young and more vulnerable life stage in the wild captivity rearing those individuals to release them back into their native habitat after they've reached a certain age or size. Head-starting will be an effective way of increasing the number of Houston toads that successfully develop into adult toads by easing them through the most vulnerable early stage of their life cycle such as eggs, tadpoles and juveniles. These are the stages when many would die naturally or be eaten by predators.

MS. LEON: All right. And before I let you go, Paige, can you tell us about some of the key conservation partners involved in this species recovery?

MS. NAJVAR: Sure. Dr. Michael Forstner at Texas State University together with his students have conducted much of the research that has been conducted on the Houston toad over the last 10 years.

Texas State University along with the Houston Zoo have worked together to develop our Houston Toad Head-Starting Program. And the Houston Zoo has also taken a leadership role in the Houston toad outreach effort.

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department is actively involved in on the ground management for Houston toads. Technical and financial assistance for private landowners and a variety of outreach and educational programs.

Environmental Defense Fund has been instrumental in making landowner contact, developing safe harbor agreements and implementing on the ground management activities. Bastrop County was the first local government to take an active leadership role in Houston toad conservation through their development and administration of Lost Pine habitat conservation plans. And the Natural Resources Conservation Service is quickly becoming another key partner in Houston toad conservation by providing landowners with technical and financial assistance.

MS. LEON: Thank you so much, Paige, for taking the time out of your day to talk to us a little bit about the Houston Toad. I really appreciate it. Thank you.

MS. NAJVAR: Sure, no problem.

MS. LEON: This is Sarah Leon for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Thanks for listening.