



Discovering, Documenting, and
Preserving the Rich Diversity of
Wild Reptiles and Amphibians

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Dear Supporter of Wildlife,

There's something highly unusual about this snake.

I want to tell you about him—but first, I want to tell you about the unusual place where he lives, in a tropical forest in Ecuador.



I know you've heard the prognosis for our planet's tropical forests: they're disappearing at an alarming rate, taking with them a startling array of plant and animal species found nowhere else on Earth. I'm also betting that most of the stories you've heard have been about the *Amazon Rainforest*. Right?

The forest I want to tell you about is a different type of tropical forest, where my conservation organization, Reptile & Amphibian Ecology International, just completed our most recent research expedition. It may not make headlines the way the Amazon does, and it's not likely to get its own benefit rock concert. But if you care about protecting our planet, you need to know more about the forest *I* know.

That's because the tropical forest I'm working to protect, mostly dry forest along the coast of Ecuador, is at the heart of a far greater ecological crisis than that facing the Amazon basin further inland. In fact, while the majority of Ecuador's Amazon rainforest is still intact, over 90% of its coastal forests have been cut down.

And, as in the more famous Amazon, it's not just forest we're losing. The coastal forests of Ecuador are a treasure trove of biological diversity—remarkably rich with plants and animals that we know, some that we're only beginning to know, and an untold number of species that we haven't even discovered yet!

You've probably heard about them before: all the plants and animals that scientists project we're losing before we even get a chance to know them. And you can understand the urgency of discovering, learning about, and protecting those species before it's too late—for their sake, and for ours. But if you're like most people, it probably seems like an impossible task—a

puzzle for scientists from big research institutions to solve—and any help you can offer seems impossibly small.

That's the beauty of my organization, Reptile & Amphibian Ecology International, and the work we've done in Ecuador. I can tell you firsthand that individuals—dedicated, independent researchers from both the United States and the forests where we work, together with volunteers from around the globe—are making exciting and important discoveries. And I can tell you that contributions from people like you will make all the difference in making more of these critical discoveries possible.

In fact, the snake you see at the top of this letter is one of our discoveries. On an expedition earlier this year in the severely imperiled, dry coastal forest I'm talking about, Reptile & Amphibian Ecology International found and photographed this snail-sucking snake, and recorded the data to tell us more about him back at the lab. In an amazing result, our snake does not match published accounts of any snake species—that is, it appears to be an entirely new species! We're very excited to pursue more information about our discovery, and we've begun the process to conclusively determine that the snake is indeed a new species and to scientifically describe it with a name.

What's more amazing is that the potential for this type of discovery is there on all our expeditions. Nearly every time one of our teams hikes into the forest, we see something we've never seen before. Every night, we find an astounding variety of life in just the small arc of light from our headlamps. It's hard work, but what we've found—and recorded—inspires and motivates me.

But we need to inspire and motivate more people, because the clock is ticking. Since these forests are disappearing, we need to make more of these discoveries about their imperiled plants and animals now. If we find unique and endangered species in a remaining patch of forest, that tells us we must also take action—immediately—to save that forest.

For example, one of our study sites, “Bosque Protector La Perla,” is a remnant of forest that once stretched for miles, but that has all but disappeared in recent years. We found that even though this small patch of forest is ancient and pristine, it is increasingly being encroached upon by cattle, agriculture, urban development, and even an oil pipeline. Along with this habitat destruction come “weed species” of reptiles and amphibians—non-native species that thrive in human-altered habitats, and threaten to outcompete native fauna. To make matters worse, many of the unique species once found in this virgin forest may have died in a recent drought—potentially influenced by global warming.

Armed with our data and conclusions, we identified La Perla as a prime candidate for establishing wildlife corridors. These narrow stretches of forest connect patches of remnant forest. Like highways for animals, these corridors allow migrant animals to travel from one patch of habitat to another. Thus, even if the animals in one forest have died out, they can reestablish themselves from another forest where they still exist. Fresh populations of diverse fauna can thrive and push out the invading “weeds.” Reptile & Amphibian Ecology International has recommended that wildlife corridors be put in place at La Perla as soon as possible.

Situations such as at La Perla are numerous and dire. We must act fast, but we need your help.

With the support of fellow conservationists like you—individuals who care about investing in the future of our planet—we can make faster progress to understand the biodiversity that’s still left, and to lay out the science that’s needed to make a case for protecting our most rare and endangered landscapes.

I’m proud to say we’ve been a resourceful and innovative team, finding ways to do this important work on a shoestring—and often, wearing holes in our shoes! We’ve relied on the exceptional dedication of our team of scientists and volunteers, who have labored untold hours on our projects, for little more than the passion to make a difference. In fact, all the proceeds from my other passion—wildlife photography—go back into funding the research projects of Reptile & Amphibian Ecology International, and as Executive Director of the organization, I’ve also personally given 14 presentations over the past year on reptiles, amphibians, and conservation biology, to audiences as varied as kindergartners, university students, and community groups.

But there’s so much more work to be done, and we’re aiming high. We have several fundraising goals for the coming months, to take our work for imperiled species—especially for reptiles and amphibians, which are key indicators of healthy ecosystems but which are often overlooked by larger conservation organizations in favor of “cuddlier” mascots—to the next level. Your contribution can:

- ❖ Purchase equipment to meet crucial technical needs for our research, from computers to global positioning systems (GPS).
- ❖ Pay travel, room and board for staff and volunteers in the field.
- ❖ Hire the services of Ecuadorian naturalists, whose knowledge has been an invaluable contribution in its own right.
- ❖ Help us acknowledge our talented team of scientists with sustainable salaries.
- ❖ Bring our work to a broader audience through the production of publications, photographs, and materials for volunteer recruitment.

With contributions from committed and conscientious individuals like yourself, we hope to make these goals realities, and to realize our ultimate goal of better understanding and protecting tropical biodiversity. Our next expedition is in January, and we look forward to getting back to the field for more exciting discoveries.

Your help will make it happen. Please use the enclosed envelope to make your tax-deductible gift. And please take a moment to visit our Web site, ReptilesAndAmphibians.org, to learn more about our projects. Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,



Paul Hamilton, PhD, Executive Director
Reptile & Amphibian Ecology International