

We need a National Reptile and National Amphibian¹

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We need two new symbols in America — a national reptile and a national amphibian. For the reptile, I nominate the garter snake. For the amphibian, I propose the leopard frog. Together they would symbolically represent America's commitment to our natural heritage of native animals, including the reptiles and amphibians, the herpetofauna. Herpetofauna for the most part are not game species and are unfamiliar to most people. Also a few can be dangerous when they defend themselves. But they are part of our natural environments and deserve our respect and protection. Designating representatives that everyone in America can be as familiar with as the bald eagle would go a long way toward shifting attitudes positively toward our native, nongame wildlife.

A mechanism for choosing a national reptile and amphibian has already been set up through Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (PARC). The national steering committee could readily set up a discussion of the selection process on their listserv. Membership to PARC is free and access to the PARC Web site (www.parcplace.org) is open to anyone. The final choice of the national reptile and amphibian could be done by a Web site vote, as was done recently in Illinois. In that election, the eastern tiger salamander was chosen as the state amphibian and the painted turtle became the state reptile. For the national reptile

and amphibian, after the PARC Web site election, the national steering committee would begin the political process of getting approval through Congress, a final step to make it official.

Every state has an officially recognized bird, flower, and tree. Thirty-five have a state mammal. More than half have a state insect. All are animals or plants that are special in some way to the state. An official state organism presumably represents the natural or cultural heritage of the state (but keep reading for some puzzling exceptions). We should celebrate our native wildlife on a national scale. This includes reptiles and amphibians.

The environmental sentiment of the country has developed to the point that we recognize that birds, mammals, trees, and flowers are not the only important natural resources in a region, state, or nation. Every state should have an official reptile, such as a turtle, snake, or lizard, and an amphibian, a frog or salamander. So should the nation.

Why should nongame, noncommercial animals get this kind of attention? Because when people feel something belongs to them, their concern for its welfare increases. Officially recog-

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BRIAN EDMOND

A Red-sided Garter Snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis parietalis*) from Holt County, Missouri. Some type of garter snake occurs in every one of the 48 contiguous states.

nized national species would enhance awareness of the natural heritage of our country and in the case of herpetofauna bring attention to a beleaguered group of animals.

Selecting a national reptile and amphibian may stir debate among herpetologists, members of PARC, and others. Although some states have shown a creative and progressive spirit in promoting native animals as symbols of their natural heritage, many state plants and animals surprisingly are not native species. Choosing an introduced species to represent one's state does not support our natural heritage. Nonetheless, 11 states have selected the European honeybee as their official insect.

Picking nonnative species does not stop with honeybees. South Dakota's bird is the Chinese ring-necked pheasant. For state mammals Missouri has a mule and five states have the horse, neither of which is native to the United States. Alabama may hold the record for the most perplexing change in a state species, changing its state flower from the native and gorgeous goldenrod (which contrary to conventional wisdom does not cause hay fever) to the camellia, an East Asian import.

But garter snakes and leopard frogs are as native as you can get, occurring in every one of the 48 contiguous states. It's true that no single species of reptile or amphibian is found in all of the states; so quibblers may point out that the species of garter snakes and leopard frogs found in Alabama are not the same

ones as those found in Arizona. Nonetheless, each represents a group of closely related, recognizable species. The fact that no species of garter snake or leopard frog occurs naturally in Hawaii should not be a concern in the debate about how to select a national animal, because neither does the bald eagle.



SUZANNE L. COLLINS, CMHA

Southern Leopard Frogs (*Rana sphenocephala*) are one in a complex of related species found throughout the continental United State.

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