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Deadly virus threatens frogs and toads with extinction

By Paul Eccleston

SCIENTISTS fear the largest extinction since the disappearance of the dinosaurs because of a deadly virus that is sweeping through amphibians.

The creatures have thrived for hundreds of millions of years but as many as half of all species could die out unless a cure is found, experts claim.

It is believed that the spread of amphibian chytrid, a parasitic fungus which has proved deadly for hundreds of amphibian species, may have been made worse by global warming.

The disease has proved unstoppable in the wild and can kill 80 per cent of amphibians, including frogs, toads, newts, salamanders and caecilians (worm-like amphibians), within months once it has taken hold.

Amphibians are important as "indicator species" - similar to canaries in a coal mine - which serve as a warning when there is something wrong with the environment.

Conservationists have designated 2008 as Year of the Frog to raise awareness of the plight of amphibians and to raise funds for a worldwide effort to save them.

The Amphibian Conservation Action Plan aims to protect the habitat of amphibians and find answers to the environmental problems they face.

The biggest initiative will be an amphibian version of Noah's Ark, costing an estimated £30 million, where the most vulnerable species will

be moved into protected areas in zoos, aquariums and other institutions around the world so their survival can be guaranteed.

"Widespread extinction of amphibians would be catastrophic," said Jeffrey P Bonner, the chairman of Amphibian Ark and the president and chief executive officer of the St Louis Zoo, Missouri.

"In addition to their intrinsic value, they offer many benefits and are a critical part of a healthy world.

"They play an important role in the food web as both predator and prey, eating insects which benefits agriculture and minimises disease spread. Their skin also has substances that protect them from some microbes and viruses, offering promising medical cures for a variety of human diseases."

Conservation groups hope the captive management plan will buy time for the most endangered species which will eventually be reintroduced to the wild once the threats they face have been removed.

Sir David Attenborough, the campaign patron, said, "The global zoo and aquarium community has taken on this challenge with enthusiasm and is providing appropriate facilities and breeding grounds within their institutions. But implementation calls for financial and political support from all parts of the world. Without an immediate and sustained conservation effort to support captive management, hundreds of species of these wonderful creatures could become extinct in our own lifetime."