

2016 Community Conservation Award

The award for 2016 was made to Frog Safe, Inc. of Edmonton, North Queensland. This organisation has operated a frog hospital for 18 years, treating over 3,000 frogs in that time and has developed a deep understanding of frog health. Frog populations around the world are in decline and our awardee is doing its best to help understand and prevent this decline. It has developed an informative website, which is consulted far and wide and has been archived by the Government as part of its PANDORA project. Frog Safe's expertise is such that it is not only consulted by persons in its locality but by persons, including vets, in all parts of Australia and even from overseas. It has succeeded in making the world its community.

Deborah Pergolotti sent the following message to be read at the meeting.

Thank you for the lovely recognition of our efforts. We do what we do because the frogs need it and because we all, as spiritual beings, need to help fix our ailing and suffering planet by whatever skills we have to offer. We don't care if anyone ever says 'thank you' for taking in a frog in distress or ridicules us for spending money on individuals in a taxon considered 'a lower animal' in the food chain.

What is causing frog decline should be of paramount concern to everyone. The world would not be in such a state of cataclysm if we all paid attention to the loud and very clear message we are getting from the frogs that turn up on our doorstep.

Even after our 18 years of rescuing and rehabilitating frogs, frog rehab is still fairly new on the 'radar' and not enough people are involved. But frogs are telling us in the most graphic way that we are slowly poisoning them to death – parts per million at a time. When our Founding President starting doing this activity, everyone assumed that local frog declines were the result of the highly publicised chytrid fungus. But our work of actually receiving and examining distressed frogs from a wide geographic area (Townsville to Cape York) has proven that chytrid fungus is NOT responsible for the severe local decline in frogs (and cane toads!). Ultimately, chemicals – in particular, the neonicotinoids – will be proven responsible for frog losses. Our message to the Australian government is that if it cares at all for the protection of biodiversity, it needs to ban those chemicals found to attack our native species.

Thanks again for putting our humble efforts in the spotlight!



Alas, poor frog...

CAIRNS FROG HOSPITAL

Wildlife rehabilitators do such an important job with a wide variety of Australian species but what is happening to the country's frog populations is quite the 'next level'. The concept of frog rehab is still a new venture for many wildlife rescue groups and some have probably been dragged into it because the calls keep coming in from the public about sick and dead frogs in their yards. It is a very difficult area to get into if you are new to it.

It is 'old hat', however, for one lady up in Cairns, far north Queensland. Her name is Deborah Pergolotti and she started the small non-profit Cairns Frog Hospital back in August 1998. Early on, even other frog conservation groups would ask her, "Why would you bother rescuing frogs? They lay so many eggs in each clutch" – but those questions fell on deaf ears. Deborah KNEW this activity was going to be critical – possibly more so than for any other native wildlife that rehabbers assist.

Cairns is an excellent place to kickstart a new operation focussing on frog health. Immediately after the chemical group neonicotinoids hit the local market, residents started to report sick and dead white-lipped tree frogs (*Litoria infrafrenata*) in their yards. The next year, the numbers got worse. Coincidentally, Deborah was trying to recover from chronic illness and was looking for something constructive to do from home. Having been involved with the Sydney-based Frog and Tadpole Study Group before relocating north, a frog project was what she set her mind to. Knowing how rapidly a frog species can go from common to extinct when a new pathogen arrives was the guiding base principle.

This setup would include learning to match clinical symptoms with health problems and trialling what techniques would repair different illnesses and injuries. Because the animals come in directly from the public, it is also a very useful disease surveillance exercise which allows Deborah to know many

months earlier than the government when a new problem starts affecting frogs.

There are so many reasons why frog rescue is important and should be taken up by rescue groups all around the country. In the tropical north at least, much of the decline has been pinned on chytrid fungus, but it is almost non-existent on the tropical coast so there are other reasons for the Cairns coastal area having lost approximately 95 percent of its frog population since 1997. Loss of habitat is always part of the situation for any declining species but what is actually happening to Australia's frogs is almost certainly down to rampant chemical use – especially the neonicotinoids which came on the market in 1996.

Above: Another freak occurrence which the lab said wasn't cancer but they didn't know what it actually was.

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The value of rescuing frogs is that it provides firsthand information about what is actually happening to the animals. The frogs that come into the Cairns Frog Hospital have everything from bacterial infections, viruses, heavy loads of parasites and protozoa, flesh-eating disorders, several types of cancer and malformations. They are clearly immune-deficient. They also have a range of injuries but the majority of injuries have been incurred because the frog is sick and in the wrong place at the wrong time. These are not conventional problems and require careful handling, a lot of attention to disinfection procedures, and a great deal of experience in recognising the subtle clinical symptoms and how they might overlap when the animal has several concurring pathogen problems.

Eighteen years and nearly 3,000 adult frogs later, the Cairns Frog Hospital is now consulted by veterinarians, keepers and rehabbers around the country (and even overseas!) to assist with diagnosing amphibian health problems. The indications of this work point to a glaring need for extensive toxicology work on amphibians to prove which chemicals are involved in disabling their immune system. Only after those questions are answered will it be possible to slow and eventually reverse the decline in amphibians.

The Cairns Frog Hospital does not get government support and exists strictly on business sponsorships and public donations. Their website – www.frogsafe.org.au – is packed with information.



One of the most common cancers in local frogs has been squamous cell carcinoma.



Flesh-eating disorders are another common problem.



Malformations are centred around bone abnormalities where they appear to be 'rubberised'.



A common malformation is for one or both eyes to be missing.