

Amphibian extinctions sweep the world

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A devastating fungus is reportedly sweeping the world, wiping out entire populations of amphibians, with more than 120 species gone extinct since 1980.

The devastation has so alarmed biologists they are using temporary tanks in hotel rooms and people's houses in some areas to save some of the most endangered species -- in what one biologist called "one of the largest extinction spasms for vertebrates in history," The Chicago Tribune reported Wednesday.

One major concern -- aside from the role they play in the food chain by consuming insects -- is that amphibians are believed to have great medical potential. Some frog's skin appears to inhibit HIV infection, and pharmaceutical companies are researching a compound found in frogs that could yield a painkiller 200 times more potent than morphine, the Tribune said.

"It is a race against time, and it's a matter of months," Bob Lacy, a population geneticist at the Chicago area's Brookfield Zoo, told the newspaper.

He said at least one-third of the Earth's 6,000 amphibian species are threatened.

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