

Researchers stunned by inmates' success raising endangered frogs

July 9 2009, By Jennifer Sullivan

Kneeling on the edge of a tank the size of a child's wading pool, Harry Greer thrust his arm into the cool water and scooped up three frogs.

Greer smiled like a proud parent as the tiny green and black spotted frogs squirmed in his hand. He bragged about how he had raised the endangered amphibians from eggs to tadpoles to juvenile frogs only steps from his prison cell.

Since spring, Greer and fellow inmate Albert Delp have spent the bulk of their days inside a small fenced-off area at the Cedar Creek Corrections Center fussing over -- and fattening -- several dozen frogs.

The two men are part of a project to bolster the dwindling population of the Oregon spotted frog, an animal once widespread in the Puget Sound area. The effort focuses on raising the frogs until they get big enough to no longer be a snack for natural predators.

"They would like to re-establish them back at Fort Lewis and I'm part of the project," said Greer, who is serving time for robbery.

With guidance from a senior researcher from the state Department of Fish and Wildlife and staff from nearby Evergreen State College, the two men started with 80 Oregon spotted frog eggs in early April. As the eggs grew into tadpoles then into frogs, the two men have been responsible for the frequent feedings and tank-water changes. The whole time they have taken detailed notes for state researchers.

Greer, 45, and Delp, 47, admit that they had never heard of the Oregon spotted frog -- or even recall taking biology in school -- but the results of their 85-cent-per-hour job has stunned researchers. Since the project started, only eight of their frogs have died -- a figure significantly lower than at Woodland Park Zoo, the Oregon Zoo and Northwest Trek, which are also part of the project to rear the Oregon spotted frog in captivity.

Marc P. Hayes, the Department of Fish and Wildlife senior research scientist leading the effort, said that he had doubted the success of the project behind bars. But his concerns vanished after he saw how much time Greer and Delp could devote to the project.

"They have the time to address care on a level that is not possible with those other institutions," Hayes said. "They baby those things literally night and day. They can look at them every two hours and feed them at a higher rate. They have the time to give them a much closer level of care."

For Greer and Delp, who is serving time for felony drunken driving, their success has led them to view the other research sites competitively. They don't hesitate giving their frogs an extra cricket or two, with the hope of beefing up the tiny frogs. Hayes said the frogs in the prison's 300-gallon tank appear larger and stronger than those being raised at the other sites.

"We have a species that has been eliminated for its historical range in the Puget Sound region," said Rich Sartor, zoological curator at Northwest Trek. "Our whole point is to take them into captivity for a while and head start them, get them up to a size that we think will let them make it once they are turned loose. You want to have a lot of big, happy, healthy frogs at the end of the day. So far Cedar Creek -- they're champs."

Delp and Greer have photocopies of a typical Oregon spotted frog

growth chart tacked to the wall of their work shack, located in an area of the prison dubbed "Frogga Walla," a nod to the prison at Walla Walla. Jeff Muse, who manages Evergreen State College's expanding sustainable prisons project, said that a master's degree student regularly travels to the prison to work with the inmates and act as a liaison between them and Hayes.

Hisami Yoshida, superintendent at the Thurston County prison, said that when she heard about the frog project she was in full support of inmate participation. Prison staff picked Greer and Delp from a small group of inmates who applied for the research jobs.

In the spring, before the eggs arrived, Hayes held a small lecture at the prison about the Oregon spotted frogs, which have commonly faced high death rates in the wild because they are a popular food source for birds, fish, snakes and bullfrogs. Spotted frogs have been listed as an endangered species by the state for more than a decade.

Greer and Delp will keep tending to the frogs until early fall, when the creatures are large enough to be released into the wild at a wetland area near Fort Lewis.

Hayes is expecting that more than 1,000 frogs will be released this fall, a figure significantly lower than expected because the 500 eggs growing at Northwest Trek, near Eatonville, died off at the tadpole stage after troubles with the temperature of the tank water.

All of the frogs will be tagged, and about a dozen will also be equipped with radio transmitters so researchers can track their whereabouts, Hayes said. When they are released, the frogs will be under a year old and weigh around 0.7 ounces.

"We want to understand the movements they're making, where they're

going. To understand their behavior post release," Hayes said.

Yoshida said a decision has not been made on whether the inmate researchers will be able to leave the prison to help with the massive frog release.

For several years Cedar Creek, a 500-inmate minimum-security prison nestled in the Capitol Forest, has been known as a home for environmentally focused programs. Inmates have been able to work alongside Department of Natural Resources crews in fighting fires, they have maintained a large organic garden and raised honeybees. Many of the programs started after a successful partnership with a scientist from Evergreen State College, Nalini Nadkarni, who convinced Hayes that he should open up the Oregon spotted frog research to inmates, Hayes said.

Greer said that raising frogs is one of the best paying jobs at the prison -- at \$5 per hour, asbestos removal is the best. Delp said he left a job handing out basketballs at the prison gym for the frog project.

"This is not that labor-intensive and it's interesting," Delp said. "Guys (other inmates) are always pouring questions on me. A lot of people have toyed with frogs."

Greer and Delp's success has persuaded [frog](#) researchers to expand the program at Cedar Creek next year, more than doubling the number of frogs raised there. Hayes said he would also like to see the effort launched at other prisons.

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