

New species abound in Peru, but so do threats

December 28 2010, by Roberto Cortijo



A "*Ranitomeya amazonica*", a frog with an incredible burst of flames on its head, and contrasting water-patterned legs - one of the species announced by WWF in a new report. Each year, a new bird is found and every four years a new mammal discovered in the Peruvian Amazon, a haven for biodiversity where conservation and danger often go hand in hand.

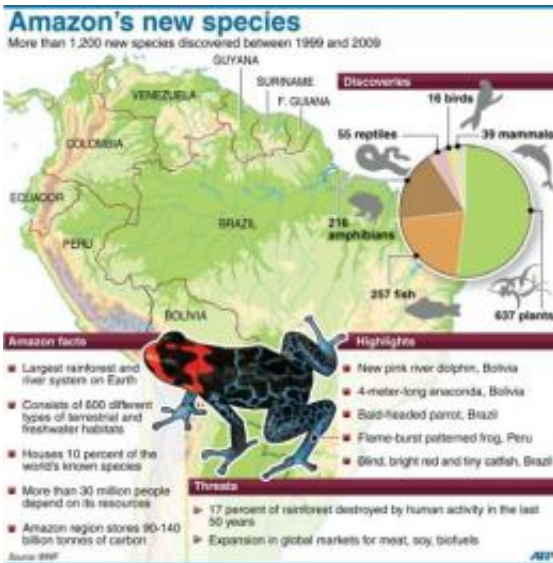
Each year, a new bird is found and every four years a new mammal discovered in the Peruvian Amazon, a haven for biodiversity where conservation and danger often go hand in hand.

Although Peru is known for its Andes mountain range, the Amazon actually covers 60 percent of the country's territory. It is a hotbed of bio-activity and is home to 25,000 species of plants -- 10 percent of the world's stock.

Thanks to the Amazon, Peru has the world's second-largest [bird](#)

[population](#) (1,800 species) and is among the top five countries for mammals (515 species) and reptiles (418 species).

This year alone, scientists stumbled upon a previously unknown leech and a new type of mosquito.



Graphic on a WWF study reporting the discovery of new species in the Amazon region over the past decade.

The animal population has grown in recent years, namely adding a mini poison dart frog with a fire-red head and blue legs (*Ranitomeya amazonica*), a purple-throated Sunangel [hummingbird](#) (*Helianthus viola*) and a "[tyrannosaurus](#) leech" with eight teeth (*Tyrannobdella reina*).

More than 1,200 new species of plants or animals have been discovered in 10 years in the Amazon, according to the Worldwide Fund for Nature. But paradoxically, the novel species are often discovered during the very

activities that threaten the Amazon the most.

"Most of these discoveries don't happen during scientific expeditions, which are often costly. They most often come when workers are digging exploration sites for oil, mining or lumber companies," said WWF Peru's Amazon program director Michael Valqui.

"This type of discovery is also simultaneously endangering the species that is being discovered in its one and only habitat."

Peru, home to one of the biggest forest lands -- 700,000 square kilometers (270,270 square miles) -- is also a magnet for resource extraction.

The number of concessions granted has doubled since 2006 to cover 16 percent of the territory, according to the Observatory of Mining Conflicts in Latin America.

At the same time, Peru boasts of being on the cutting edge of conservation, with 15 percent of its territory under protected status.

"And we're aiming for 30 percent," said Environment Minister Antonio Brack.

Environmentalists, though, worry about the future of biodiversity and the species living outside these protected zones.

"There are no clear signals as to what the country intends to do to protect biodiversity," said Ivan Lanegra, representative of the influential government-funded Peruvian ombudsman office.

Gerard Herail of France's IRD research and development institute in Lima noted that "a mining or hydrocarbons firm is not innately

destructive. The key is whether or not it is 'clean'," or uses cleaner methods and technologies.

More species are disappearing than are being discovered around the world, noted Ernesto Ræz, who heads the Sustainable Development Center at Cayetano Heredia University in Lima.

"In other words, species are disappearing before we discover them," he added.

But the IRD says the very context of their disappearance allows the group to "develop biodiversity conservation strategies," such as those deployed successfully for the huge arapaima or paiche fish (*Arapaima gigas*), one of the largest freshwater fish in the world.



Parrots in Peru's Amazon Jungle. Although Peru is known for its Andes mountain range, the Amazon actually covers 60 percent of the country's territory. It is a hotbed of bio-activity and is home to 25,000 species of plants -- 10 percent of the world's stock.

Twenty-one species remain in "critical danger" of extinction in Peru, according to 2004 numbers, including the short-tailed chinchilla

(*Chinchilla brevicaudata*) and the sharp-eared bat (*Myotis myotis*). The leaf-eared mouse (*Phyllotis andinum*) is believed to have already disappeared.

The Lima gecko (*Phyllodactylus sentosus*), a minuscule nocturnal lizard also in critical danger, illustrates the sometimes complex relationship between threat and conservation.

The gecko finds its habitat in the darkest corners of the huacas, pre-Hispanic burial grounds or ritual sites that dot Lima and the coast.

"But archeologists' maintenance work, crucial for conservation, is exactly what's destroying the gecko's habitat" and triggering its downfall, said Valqui.

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