

# 'FARC frog' caught up in Colombian conflict

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Stuffed "Atelopus Farci" frogs, named after the Farc guerilla fighters, at the National University of Colombia, in Bogota

The little green frog's natural camouflage reminded the professor who discovered it of the guerrilla fighters hiding out in the very same Colombian forest.

So American zoologist John Douglas Lynch controversially named the new species *Atelopus farci*, for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the Marxist rebel group that has been fighting the

government since 1964.

Now, despite their olive-green camo, both the FARC and the frog have disappeared from the creature's sole habitat, a mountainside forest in central Colombia, near the town of Alban.

Conservationists fear the little frog is extinct—collateral damage in the government's increasingly promising peace process with the guerrillas, whose insurgency had the beneficial side-effect of protecting rural areas from deforestation and agriculture, according to Lynch.

"Cloaked in camouflage and hiding out in the forest, (the frog) immediately reminded me of the FARC," said Lynch, a professor at the National University of Colombia.

"In the (species) description, I was careful not to mention any revolutionary political aspect, but I was impressed by the fact that this guerrilla group was protecting the Andean forests."



US herpetologist John Douglas Lynch was kidnapped by FARC fighters for several days in 1999 as he conducted research in a rebel-held area

The name has not been without controversy.

"It was his decision. I never asked him why. But in my opinion, it was stupid. It could have made (the frog) a target for other armed groups or the government itself," said fellow scientist Gustavo Gonzalez, a master's student in biology at Lynch's university.

## **Twice kidnapped**

Lynch is well aware of the downside of the violence that has gripped his adopted country for more than half a century.

FARC fighters kidnapped him for several days in 1999 as he conducted research in a rebel-held area.

Another guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), kidnapped him again the following year.



The natural camouflage of this -now extinct- frog the "Atelopus Farci", reminded the professor who discovered it of the guerrilla fighters hiding out in the very same Colombian forest

After his second kidnapping, he gave up doing research in rebel-held areas.

But there was an unexpected upside to the violence, too, he says: It held big agriculture at bay, safeguarding the wild habitats of species such as *Atelopus farci*, better known as the forest stubfoot toad.

Lynch identified the species in 1985, when he collected some 200 specimens in a single night.

Today, researchers cannot find a single one.

"It's extinct," said Lynch, the leading authority on the species.

The forest stubfoot toad is not the only species affected.



After more than half a century of conflict that has killed more than 260,000 people, the Colombian government and the FARC say they are close to signing a peace deal

In a master's thesis entitled "The Wildlife of War and Peace in Colombia," journalist Lina Tono recently explored how the waning of the conflict has led to an expansion of palm oil plantations, to the detriment of native forests and [species](#) such as the brown spider monkey, which is critically endangered.

## **Danger of peace?**

After more than half a century of conflict that has killed more than 260,000 people, the Colombian government and the FARC say they are close to signing a peace deal.

The FARC have been observing a unilateral ceasefire since July, and the government has reciprocated by halting air strikes.

The guerrillas agreed to sit down to talks in 2012, after former president Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010) scaled up the army's offensive and forced the FARC to retreat from some of their strongholds, including the forest around Alban.

That enabled Lynch and other scientists to return to formerly rebel-held areas for the first time in years.

When Lynch went back to Alban, he searched high and low but failed to find a single [forest](#) stubfoot toad.

The waters where the frogs used to live smelled bad and had no tadpoles, he said.

Lynch discovered several pig farms had been opened higher up the mountain, whose runoff was contaminating water sources.

He fears the end of Latin America's longest-running conflict will paradoxically have a negative impact on conservation.

Others are more positive about the end of the war.

For scientists, "the main impact of the conflict has been to limit access to field work sites, limit the possibility for quality, long-term research, in a large part of the country," said Brigitte Baptiste, the director of the Humboldt Institute, a leading research center on Colombia's rich

biodiversity.

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