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PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

December 26, 2007

For immediate release

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Frog Friendly Forests

New York forest owners place a high value on the wildlife on their land, with songbirds and game animals like white-tailed deer and wild turkey at the top of the popularity list. Our forests also provide homes for less visible species of wildlife, and among these are the amphibians. Frogs and salamanders are lurking under rocks and rotting logs, breeding in temporary pools, and foraging for food high in your treetops. With a little effort, forest owners can help protect these fascinating creatures and in the process develop a greater appreciation of nature.

Amphibians are commonly associated with wetlands and even small moist microsites, for good reason. Most amphibians spend some of their life in water. Many species, however, spend a good deal of time on land, and a few are totally terrestrial. Red-backed salamanders, perhaps the most abundant vertebrate in most New York forests, live out their complete life cycle on land. Most people are familiar with the piercing springtime calls of the spring peeper, but are they aware that these treefrogs leave their watery haunts after the breeding season and head for the woods. Another amphibian commonly encountered in the forests of New York is the eastern newt. The bright orange-colored juvenile form of this salamander called a red eft lives on land and is easily spotted walking boldly on the forest floor. Even amphibians usually associated with wet habitats like the common green frog use forests. Research conducted in upstate New York showed green frogs often venture considerable distances from their summer habitat to seek out small streams and seeps on forested hillsides for winter hibernation sites.

Amphibians are sensitive to environmental changes, and for some species their populations are on the decline. Forest owners can help protect frogs and salamanders if they learn more about the types of amphibians that live on their property, and find out about their life cycles and habitat needs. To learn what amphibians are likely to live in your woodlot visit bookstores or libraries for identification manuals, use the Internet, and contact local nature centers for programs and information on amphibians. Armed with some knowledge you can start searching for amphibians on your property. Don't expect to find all the amphibians in your woodlot, many salamanders for example are rarely seen outside of their brief breeding season.

After you become familiar with the common amphibians in your area and their habitat preferences you can examine your property to determine how well it meets their needs. One of the easiest ways to help enhance amphibian habitat is to provide plenty of cover. The moist environment in and underneath decaying wood provides excellent cover for a number of salamanders, so leave some downed trees and large limbs behind when harvesting firewood or timber. Rock and brush piles also make good cover for amphibians. Adding logs or limbs to shallow areas of streams and ponds will enhance habitat for both juvenile and adult amphibians.

Avoid disturbing wetlands, streams, springs, seeps, ravines, and rock outcrops because they provide unique habitat for amphibians. Temporary areas of ponded water, also called vernal pools, are especially important because they provide breeding habitat that is free of fish that prey on amphibian eggs and young. Set aside a natural buffer area around these pools so they are protected from timber harvesting and recreational activities. A buffer of 50 to 100 feet wide is often enough to protect a seasonal pool. If you don't have any seasonal pools on your property consider building some.

Many species of amphibians live in or next to small woodland streams. Set aside a buffer at least 50 feet wide to help maintain the quality of the creeks on your property. When conducting management activities like timber harvesting or trail building use care to minimize damage to streams caused by erosion and siltation. Minimize the number of stream crossings and use proper construction techniques for forest roads and trails. A professional forester or your county Soil and Water Conservation District can help you select best management practices that will help prevent serious problems.

Landowners sometimes inadvertently create hazards for amphibians. Large ruts in haul roads or trails may fill with water to create attractive pools for amphibians. If roads or trails are used by tractors or ATV's during the breeding season these pools become death traps for amphibians. Other hazards include mowing too close to pond edges and removing travel corridors between wetlands and forests.

Managing your forest to protect amphibians can be compatible with many other management objectives including timber harvesting. Just remember to take the habitat and life cycle needs of frogs and salamanders into consideration before you embark on projects that can impact their homes. For additional information on frog and salamander friendly forests visit:

<http://www.dec.state.ny.us/website/dfwmr/wildlife/herp/index.html>

<http://www.cortland.edu/herp/>

<http://herpcenter.ipfw.edu>

For additional information on forestland activities that will benefit your objectives, visit Cornell's forestry website at www.ForestConnect.info, contact your local office of Cornell University Cooperative Extension, or join the New York Forest Owners Association through their website at www.nyfoa.org.

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Word count: 840 words

Editors note: This article is the fifth in a 15 part series that is provided through a joint initiative of Cornell University Cooperative Extension and the New York Forest Owners Association as an educational service that helps the citizen of New York enjoy, use, and sustain private rural lands. For more information on these and other topics, please contact your local office of Cornell Cooperative Extension or visit www.ForestConnect.info or www.NYFOA.org