



FRANS LANTING PHOTO

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STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

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people in cars whizzing up and down Highway 1 near the Rio Del Mar exit seldom turn their heads in the direction of the expensively-fenced Valencia Pond that sits next to the freeway. Valencia Pond is one of the last breeding places for the Monterey Bay

area's very own endangered species, the Santa Cruz Long-Toed Salamander.

The mini-refuge rarely attracts visitors these days. On weekends there are no hordes of tourists who jostle each other to get a glimpse of "the creature" as they do when bellicose elephant seals haul out at Ano Nuevo. There is a scarce human audience partly because the Santa Cruz Long-Toed is so secretive. It's a true night crawler, usually only coming out of hiding on warm rainy nights.

However, their secretive nature doesn't entirely explain the absence of popular fanfare. People have been known to risk their lives by diving deep beneath the sea, or pay large sums of money to swallow dust and experience while riding in a Landrover across the plains of Africa to peer at exotic wildlife. In part, like Rodney Dangerfield, salamanders have a tough time getting respect. It has to do with prevailing attitudes about animals that slither and creep, especially when they're tiny and their skin is somewhat clammy. Put simply, they've been slandered. In our "information age," misinformation about them still abounds.

For example, many people still believe toads cause warts and snakes are slimy. I remember a kid named Barney in my elementary school days who took delight in making girls squeal by describing salamander sandwiches, banana slug soup,

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and lizard tail salad. He was so good at conjuring up images of revolting culinary concoctions that he could send half a classroom of youngsters contorting across the playground, feigning nausea and screaming words like "yuck, sick, and puke." Whatever our childhood programming on the cold-blooded animals that creep and crawl, many of us simply view them as insignificant.

Luckily for the Santa Cruz Long-Toed Salamander, the combination of a group of unaffected local residents, a few outsiders, and the Endangered Species Act of 1966 saved this little night crawler from being bulldozed into extinction for a wider road and a trailer court. In fact, the actual events have all the ingredients of a blockbuster novel. There's the innocent, helpless victim with unique sexual behavior; a scientist who turns out to be a tragic hero; an Armageddon of sorts, complete with whole populations being buried alive; chase scenes involving California Department of Fish and Game officers and motorcyclists; some comical moments; enough political and bureaucratic paper work to sink a good sized boat; and threats from foreign invaders.

Naturally, in the beginning there was just the Santa Cruz Long-Toed Salamander. They had lived in and around the seasonal coastal ponds for more than 12,000 years, mastering secrecy as a survival strategy. During the summer months they hid in animal burrows and in root systems in the hills around their ponds. In the winter they descended to their ponds to court and breed in one of the more amorous appearing events in nature.

The males arrive at the ponds first, lie in wait, and swarm all over the females when they arrive. The first females are courted by as many as 100 males until a suitor is chosen to ride piggy-back-style on a swim across the pond. During the swim, the male lets loose the powerful juices of his hedonic gland (located on his chin), which he hopes further encourages the female to breed. If the chemistry is right, they touch noses and the male secretes a jelly-like sperm substance near his mate. She then absorbs it, impregnating herself, and swims off to lay her eggs.

Apparently they went about their business so discreetly that of the few people who noticed them, nobody thought of them as unique. It wasn't until 1954, when by pure chance U.C. Berkeley graduate student James Anderson happened into the area to visit some friends, that they were awarded a footnote in scientific journals. Anderson had been studying salamanders and when he saw a few crossing the road, he stopped and threw them in a sack and took them back to Berkeley. The next day he was dumbfounded when he realized the brightly gold-flaked creatures in his sack were an "undiscovered" variety. Anderson returned and located populations at Valencia Pond and a larger population at Ellicot Pond near the Santa Cruz/Monterey County line; he noted that their nearest relatives were in the Sierra foothills. Though Anderson and a few scientists were excited about the discovery, little news of it spread to public or government agencies.

With no knowledge of Anderson's find, CalTrans, working to widen Highway 1, unceremoniously graded and drained ninety percent of Valencia Pond, burying thousands of salamanders in the process. This was in the days before stringent laws safeguarding endangered species, when widespread public concern about even the more cuddly looking creatures hadn't blossomed, let alone concern for a rarely seen four-inch salamander. Things got worse for the salamanders when their human ally, James Anderson, was killed in a car crash.

However, the knowledge of his discovery lived on and in 1966 the Endangered Species Act was passed. It required governmental intervention for any species endangered with extinction at the hands of man. This act was nondiscriminatory. Salamanders, like bighorn sheep and sea otters, get the same treatment if they are threatened with extinction. So, in 1971, when the owners of the land that included Ellicot Pond (the salamander's last known stronghold) applied for a zoning permit that called for bulldozing the pond to make way for a trailer court, there was an outcry.

Grumbling first came from a handful of scientists, but quickly spread to include high school and university students as well as sympathetic citizens.

Bumper stickers became numerous, proclaiming, "Save the Santa Cruz Long-Toed Salamander." Newspapers, even the Associated Press, took up the cause. To some the salamander became known as Santa Cruz Sally.

The salamander was ridiculed for its insignificance among development interests. What could stand in the way of progress next, the common house fly? Some were outraged that a slimy creature that was nearly impossible to find could put a stop to a perfectly normal development.

But, the Endangered Species Act didn't take into account human prejudices. Once the salamander was clearly identified as unique, the slow but sure wheels of justice began to roll. On their own, CalTrans created a new Valencia Pond allowing that population to breed again. They even engineered drainage from the highway so oils couldn't pollute the pond. The Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors turned down the Ellicot development, which opened the way for purchasing both ponds as

gist to regularly assess the survival needs of the salamanders.

A certain amount of zealousness crept into the work. Steve Ruth, an independent biologist working for Fish and Game, discovered large numbers of non-native, highly predatory bullfrogs near Ellicot Pond. Many feared the bullfrogs were on the verge of consuming the salamanders. Ruth took to shooting the frogs on sight to safeguard the salamanders, until he was arrested for hunting them out of season. He gave an impassioned speech to the judge about the salamander's plight and drew a reduced fine.

Not long after, internationally renowned Santa Cruz-based wildlife photographer Frans Lanting was nearly arrested when residents near one pond reported a strange-acting man crawling about during raining nights wearing a miner's hat with an inlaid spotlight. The responding officer found Lanting stooped over a tiny salamander with his camera while an assistant misted the little creature to get it to behave optimally, as they do during rainy nights.

More importantly, it was found that the salamanders crept as far as a mile from their ponds, which meant their habitat was much farther reaching than anyone had imagined. This prompted the county to pass the only pro-salamander ordinance in the United States. Residents in salamander zones were required to build salamander ramps on retaining walls, and were forbidden to take out excessive amounts of local indigenous plant life that provided a home to the salamanders. It also brought in the federal government which purchased 150 more acres to add to the 30 acres already purchased by the state.

Today, the salamanders at Valencia and Ellicot Ponds seem fairly safe. They are perhaps 12,000 strong around both ponds, and some smaller populations have been found in Monterey County.

When asked if all the effort that went into saving the Long-Toed was worth it, Johnson says, "Sure it was. I realize the animal may seem insignificant to some, but if we keep pulling threads from mother nature's quilt, eventually we'll be unable to see the pattern."