

the Frog that Roared



Ada development threatens to wipe out a tiny amphibian

*"The Child is the father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety."*

— William Wordsworth, 1802

As an adult, you walk with your eyes level to the horizon.

Can you remember, as a child, how much time you spent investigating Mother Earth, her dirt, clay, grass, worms, insects and amphibians, when they were closer to you? As grownups, our interests in the land shift. Instead of looking at what's in the land, we concern ourselves with how we can "develop" the land that holds those living treasures.

You might once again start paying more attention to little critters again because one of nature's smallest voices is calling out to us in Ada: "You'd better listen."

It's the tiny Blanchard's cricket frog pleading with us not to "develop" on its home.

A 311-acre site, which includes a housing development known as Ada Moorings, is the source of much debate. The little-known 1 1/2-inch frog is becoming the proverbial mouse that roared in that debate.

Earlier this month, Cori Richards, a 21-year-old biology and chemical engineering major at the University of Michigan and native of Ada, helped call attention to the plight of the tiny frog.

Participating in a Department of Natural Resources study, Richards was reporting on the frog and toad populations as a method to determine environmental quality. While listening at excavated ponds in Ada Moorings, the development on a Grand River flood plain, Richards heard the call — which is similar to the sound of little stones rapped together — of the Blanchard's cricket frog in three of the four ponds at the development site.

Alarmed by the development's encroachment on the frog's natural habitat, Richards promptly contacted Ada Township Clerk Deb Ensing-Millhuff when she heard the frog's call.

With 60 homes already built on 70 acres, there are another 100 homes planned, which could eliminate the population of this frog that is indigenous, but not unique, to Southern Michigan.

"We need to be sensitive — not because we don't want development, but because of the long-term effects on the environment, especially on the flood plains," says Ensing-Millhuff. "They count frogs because they are the first sign of an ecological change."

Pat Lederle, endangered species coordinator for the

DNR, says the brown, tan, or olive green amphibian with the dark, triangular marking on the top of its head could go on the endangered species list.

Although not afforded legal protection under the Endangered Species Act Protection Laws, the frog is protected by state wildlife regulations.

"The Blanchard's cricket frog is afforded protection under a DNR director's order, which stipulates regulations on the take of reptiles and amphibians," says Lederle. The regulation states it "shall not be taken from the wild and possessed except as authorized by the DNR director." Lederle says a 'special concern' species is one that they think could be in trouble, so they spend a little more time studying the distribution and abundance.

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Lori Sargent, natural heritage specialist of the DNR's wildlife division, says the Blanchard's cricket frog has a very specific habitat — mud flats, a type of wet land found in the southern part of the lower peninsula in Michigan. This type of habitat makes them more vulnerable.

"We think their habitats are declining just like most habitats in Michigan," says Sargent. The status of "special concern" can be given to a species that might be especially vulnerable to a threat or if the DNR is not sure of an animal's population.

"Right now, we have 10 or less known populations, and we know where they are. We're pretty sure, but at this point we don't know. We may find there's more than we think."

The frogs are too small to count, so the DNR uses the term "populations" when they know one or more of the frogs exists. "Endangered" means three or fewer populations exist in the wild, and "threatened" means 10 or fewer populations exist.

Lederle says when developments such as the one at Ada Moorings are being permitted, the DNR does an environmental review on the area to determine whether there are special concern species and alert the officials if there are.

"I don't know whether the development is a threat or not," says township planner Jim Ferro. "If the frog was heard on an excavated pond, then the development has created a habitat."

"To say the (Ada Moorings) development created a habitat for the Blanchard's cricket frog is possible, but not likely," says Sargent. "I wouldn't say that's the optimal habitat. They might be found there, but it might not be in great numbers."

The debate over Ada Moorings dates back to 1985, when the DNR gave approval to a development plan. After two years of legal wrangling, Ada Township residents voted in a referendum to overturn the township board's approval of new zoning — from agricultural to medium-density residential — for the development.

Kent County Circuit Court Judge George Cook overruled voters in July of '87 saying, "the referendum has an effect on the township board but not on the court. The people can't, by election, adopt an unconstitutional (invalid) ordinance." The \$60 million development ensued.

"They're still here, they're not extinct," says Jim Harding, professor of zoology, herpetology and specialist in wildlife conservation at Michigan State University. "They are susceptible to pollutants, but it could also be natural succession and that we're closing in on their habitats."

Natural succession is when you start with bare ground, water and mud that goes through stages. First, water lilies, cattails, then shrubbery soak up the water supply and the pond dries out.

Harding says Blanchard's cricket frogs are totally gone from Lansing areas. Their concentration is in the southwest quadrant of lower Michigan; Kalamazoo, Berrien County, Allegan County, Barry County. The little guy has almost completely disappeared from Wisconsin, but Harding says they seem to be holding on in southern Illinois, Missouri and Kansas.

"It wouldn't be a problem for a species that had room to expand but the historical sites from the '40s and '50s have been subdivided into oblivion," says Harding.

"My overall concern is that when a development is going into a sensitive area, for each home there is more pesticide, fertilizer, run-off, groundwater contamination and this critter has to have a habitat," says Ensing-Millhuff. "If their habitat is destroyed they don't have a lot of alternatives; either move out or die out."

For this little creature, whose life span is only one year, any disruption can wipe out the entire population.

If you want to voice your concern, you may reach the Ada Township Offices at 676-9191. Or you can contact the DNR Wildlife Division at (517) 373-9418. To participate in the frog and toad survey contact Sargent in the spring at (517) 373-9418.

— Michelle Ste