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Zoo Conservation Project Sends 3,700 Puerto Rican Crested Toads Tadpoles Home to Repopulate

July 15, 2016-- *Jacksonville, FL* – Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens (JZG), in partnership with several other AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums and government agencies, is working to bring the Puerto Rican crested toad back from the brink of extinction and restore healthy population levels in the wild as part of a long-term conservation initiative. On July 7, the Zoo sent more than 3,700 crested toad tadpoles, who were hatched at the Zoo, home to Puerto Rico to help bolster wild populations.

The Puerto Rican crested toad is the only toad native to the island and was once thought to be extinct. Habitat loss, rising sea levels, the introduction of non-native species, and disease have nearly wiped out the species.

Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens has participated in this conservation effort for the past eight years, and to date has sent out nearly 8,500 tadpoles hatched at the zoo for release into protected habitats in northern and southern Puerto Rico.

The Zoo currently maintains four adult breeding pairs of Puerto Rican crested toads in its Amphibian Conservation Center; three of these pairs recently produced the abundance of tadpoles released on July 7. Herpetology keepers spend weeks preparing and conditioning the adults for reproduction. Temperatures and rainfall are manipulated and an audio recording of the melodious sound of toads calling is played over speakers to stimulate courtship. Within two days, the Zoo's population increases by nearly four thousand residents.

The tadpoles develop for another two weeks, feasting on spinach and algae, before a coordinated shipment is made to Puerto Rico. The tadpoles are carefully boxed up and flown to Puerto Rico where they are met by officials from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and Puerto Rican Department of Natural Environmental Resources (PRDNER) and transported to the reintroduction ponds for release. Biologists then closely monitor the release sites to gauge how well the released individuals and population are doing and identify any potential threats or concerns that may be affecting their success.

The crisis faced by the Puerto Rican crested toad is not unique. Amphibians such as frogs, toads, newts and salamanders are facing a global extinction crisis mainly due to rising global temperatures and emerging diseases including a devastating fungus called *chytrid*. To combat the growing amphibian crisis, Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens opened its "Save the Frogs! Amphibian Conservation Center" in 2007. The center, which is on display to the public, features climate-controlled rooms dedicated to breeding threatened and endangered species for release back into the wild. Along with the work being done with the Puerto Rican crested toad, Zoo herpetology staff is also breeding and releasing the imperiled Striped Newts back into the Florida panhandle in partnership with the Coastal Plains Institute, and is emerging as a pioneer in the captive breeding of the Gulf Coast waterdog, an aquatic salamander native to western Florida and neighboring states.

About Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens

For over 100 years, the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens has aimed to inspire the discovery and appreciation of wildlife through innovative experiences in a caring environment. Starting in 1914 with an animal collection of one red deer fawn, the Zoo now has more than 2,000 rare and exotic animals and 1,000 species of plants, boasting the largest botanical garden in Northeast Florida. **The Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens is a nonprofit organization and a portion of every ticket sold goes to the over 45 conservation initiatives Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens supports around the world, and here in NE Florida.** JZG is proud to be an accredited member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. For more information, visit jacksonvillezoo.org.