

## DEVELOPMENTAL BIOLOGY

## Proposed Frog Ban Makes a Splash

A proposal to ban the sale of African clawed toads in the United Kingdom has that country's developmental biologists worried about the availability of their favorite research animal—and conducting studies to surmount the reason for the ban. In November, the U.K.



Environmental menace? African clawed toads can spread disease.

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) issued a list of potentially harmful non-native species that it wants to ban from sale or trade. To the surprise of scientists who work with the animal, the toad, *Xenopus laevis*, was on the list. Defra says the animals can carry the chytrid fungus blamed

for mass amphibian die-offs around the world. It also noted that escaped African clawed toads can compete with—and sometimes eat—native amphibians.

The U.K. biomedical charity The Wellcome Trust and other scientific groups quickly lodged protests and filed briefs against the proposed ban. Defra's list "came out of left field," says developmental biologist Matthew Guille of the European *Xenopus* Resource Centre in Portsmouth. The two sides are likely to settle on a new licensing scheme that would limit, rather than ban, sale of the animals. But the issue has made biologists more aware of potential dangers their toad colonies pose to the environment.

For decades, developmental biologists have prized *Xenopus* for its large, robust embryos that make it possible to observe and manipulate key stages of development. In recent years, the frogs have become even more valuable to researchers, as scientists have learned to create mutants and interrupt the function of specific frog

genes. A ban on the sale of the animals would mean that researchers would have to keep their own breeding frogs on hand, making it much more difficult and expensive to manage colonies, Guille says.

Defra admits being surprised by the scientists' reaction. "We didn't realize it was quite such a big deal," says Matthew Ashton, who is coordinating the agency's response.

The scientists support Defra's aims, if not its ban. "We are biologists. I have no wish—nor do my colleagues—to be the people who are responsible for the die-off of a whole lot of native amphibians," Guille says. The *Xenopus* research community already had relatively strict standards in place to prevent wild release of their animals, he says, but in response to the proposed ban, researchers have started to test for the fungal disease, which doesn't make *X. laevis* obviously ill. Guille says that so far, levels in laboratory frog colonies seem to be low. Although there is no evidence that the fungus compromises studies by affecting *Xenopus* development, "we'd all feel a lot better if we knew we had an infection-free colony," he says. There is no recognized treatment, he says, but the fungus seems to disappear on its own when animals are kept at low density.

Ashton says Defra's final decision on the *Xenopus* ban is expected in October.

—GRETCHEN VOGEL

## EDUCATION

## Spanish Scientists Question Accreditation Plan

Many in Spain's scientific community are lobbying the country to change a new accreditation system for professors, complaining that it emphasizes nonresearch activities such as patenting, consulting, university management, and work in governmental and state agency offices. In a letter last month to the Spanish Minister of Education and Science, endorsed by more than 760 Spanish scientists, Joaquín Marro Borau, a statistical physicist at the University of Granada, expressed the concern that "many of the best scientists ... would never be able to become full professors in Spain with this marking scale" and that many competent scientists will "autoexclude themselves from the process."

Some Spanish officials have questioned the political motives of the letter—at least one signer had connections to the opposition party that lost last week's elections—and

others argue that scientists are rushing to judgment. "When accreditations start to be given out to scientists and they see that someone of their profile gets it, they are going to calm down," says Félix Pérez Martínez, coordinator of faculty evaluation for Spain's National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA).

Marro denies any political motive to the letter. And the debate over accreditation dates back to 2001 when Spain, in an attempt to bypass the old-boy network, mandated that aspiring professors first get their competences accredited. But everyone soon agreed that that process was flawed.

The new accreditation scheme replaces oral examinations with faster, electronic applications. But a complex scoring system, released in January, has come under fire for giving too much credit to nonresearch-related activities—an applicant to full

professorship must get 80 out of 100 points, although research can provide a maximum of 55 points. But the authors "have misinterpreted the importance of this marking scale," says Spanish Secretary of State for Universities and Research Miguel Ángel Quintanilla Fisac. Evaluators, adds Pérez, can give scientists points for management activities such as coordinating European research projects and sitting on editorial boards for journals.

All agree that the revised application procedure remains cumbersome. Applicants must back each achievement with written proof, for example. "They've made it so bureaucratic, difficult to comply with, and confused [that] it seems unbearable," says Maria Àngels Garcia Bach, an associate professor at the University of Barcelona.

ANECA says that it's open to adjusting the process further. "I believe that we still need to improve and ask the ANECA to make [the system] more agile," Quintanilla says.

—ELISABETH PAIN

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