Axolotl are found in only one lake near Mexico City, Xochimilco Lake, with an area of occupancy less than 10 sq. kilometers. The wild population, already severely fragmented, is experiencing a continuing decline in the extent and quality of its habitat and in the number of mature individuals. In addition, the demands of nearby Mexico City have led to the draining and contamination of much of the waters of the Xochimilco Lake complex, further decimating axolotl numbers.

This fascinating amphibian was once the top predator in its native environment, making it very important in structuring community dynamics. Introduction of large, non-native fish species has made it a prey animal, disrupting this natural relationship and adding to its already tenuous survival rate. Although they are protected by law, they are still hunted for food (roasted axolotl is considered a delicacy in Mexico) and for use in the aquarium pet trade.
**SCIENTIFIC NAME**
*Ambystoma mexicanum*

**OTHER NAMES**
Mexican walking fish

**RANGE**
Xochimilco lake in Mexico City

**HABITAT**
Freshwater lakes

**DESCRIPTION**
A long, short legged, cylindrical salamander with large gills that protrude from the back of its head. Color ranges from dark brown to almost black.

**AVERAGE SIZE**
Length: 6 – 18 inches
Weight: 80 – 200 grams

**LIFESPAN**
In the wild: 10 – 15 years
In human care: Up to 15 years

**DIET**
In the wild: Algae, plants, fish, and aquatic invertebrates
In human care: Prepared salamander food, earthworms, and trout chow

**INCUBATION**
2 WEEKS

**SEXUAL MATURITY**
18 – 24 months

**OFFSPRING**
100 – 1000 eggs per spawning

**PREDATORS**
Herons, birds of prey and humans

**BEHAVIOR**
This species of salamander is solitary except for when breeding but will display territorial aggression toward conspecifics at other times. While they are more commonly observed being active at night, they can be active at anytime throughout the day and night. They are mostly visual communicators, with some pheromonal/chemical scenting as well.

**REPRODUCTION AND BREEDING**
The underwater courtship of the axolotl is relatively short, with the male moving in dance-like patterns around the female, raising his tail and making vigorous, writhing motions. The male deposits packets of sperm (spermatophores) onto nearby rocks and plants. He then leads the female to them so she can absorb them into her cloaca for internal fertilization. While it has been documented in human care that females will have multiple clutches annually, in the wild it is usually just one per year.

Within 24 hours, the female will lay her eggs (numbering into the hundreds or even thousands) which stick onto the ground or to aquatic plants. Due to the high oxygen requirements of the eggs, they are laid singly rather than in large clumps like frog eggs. When the young hatch out in a couple of weeks, they are independent and ready to begin their solitary life.

This species exhibits an unusual and extreme trait known as neoteny (the retention of larval/juvenile stage characteristics throughout life), so axolotls usually never fully resemble an adult salamander. Unlike other amphibians, most axolotl fail to metamorphose and live permanently in water. They can, however, metamorphose if their habitat dries up.

**AMAZING FACTS**
Axolotls can regenerate body parts. Rather than forming scar tissue, tissues at the wound site convert to a stem cell-like state, meaning that they can regrow missing tissue in its entirety, even a whole limb.

As with other amphibians, the axolotl has a three-chambered heart.

Although it does develop lungs, the axolotl’s most bizarre feature is the retention of its branch-like gills. These external projections from the neck, one on each side of the head, have three branches covered with feathery filaments which increase the surface area for gas exchange.