

# SANDALWOOD HIGH SCHOOL

Sr. ALFONSO

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Nombre: \_\_\_\_\_ Hora: 1 2 3 6

## Reading Episodes #2, The Coquí

*The Puerto Rican coquí is a very tiny and small tree frog only about one inch long. Some coquíes look green, some brown and some yellowish—actually they are translucent. Coquíes have a high-pitched sound and can be heard from far away.*

*The coquíes begin to sing when the sun goes down at dusk. Their melody serenades islanders to sleep. Coquíes sing all night long until dawn, then they stop singing and head back to the nest.*

*Puerto Ricans love their coquíes and have written poems, stories, and songs about them.*

*During the time of the Native Taíno Indians, trillions of coquíes serenaded our ancestral home. Many Taíno Indian myths surround the coquí. When you look at Puerto Rican Taíno art you can see that the coquí meant a lot to them. Coquíes are found in much of the native art like pictographs and pottery.*



*When there is more light either from the moon or from street lights, there are less coquíes. Therefore there are more coquíes in isolated areas like the mountains. The species "Puerto Rican coquñi" sings co-quí, co-quí, co-quí at dusk and changes to co-quí-quí-quí, co-quí-quí-quí, co-quí-quí-quí, at dawn. It is arboreal—climbing to the top of trees in search of insects. There it remains until dawn when it changes its song and jumps down nesting until the evening.*

*Coquíes are in danger of extinction. Actually two of them are already extinct—the Coquí Dorado and the Coquí Palmeado. Others are endangered species like the Coquí Caoba and the Coquí de Eneida. Why are coquíes in danger of extinction? Because of deforestation. People have destroyed their habitat, often destroying their eggs and destroying their source of food and nourishment.*

*Puerto Rican coquíes have relatives all over Latin America. The coquí genre is found in all the Caribbean Islands, and in Central and South America. But again, the only ones that make the sound "co-quí" are Puerto Rican.*

*"If Puerto Rico was a state, it would be their state animal," said William Mautz, a University of Hawaii-Hilo biologist who studies the coqui. The fact that they are noisy — with choruses hitting 70 to 80 decibels at night, roughly equivalent to a power mower or a kitchen blender — seemed not to bother people. Puerto Rico is not such a quiet place anyway.*

*While no right-thinking coqui would therefore have chosen to migrate from Puerto Rico to Hawaii, a coqui, or some coqui eggs, did make that voyage involuntarily sometime in the late 1980s, most likely stowed away in a shipment of nursery plants. It turned out that the Puerto Rican coquies didn't know that they were missing. For purposes of going forth and multiplying, they discovered in Hawaii a coqui paradise.*

*Unlike Puerto Rico, Hawaii had no coqui predators, specifically no snakes. There were plenty of insects for all and plenty of places to hide, particularly among the lava rocks on the island of Hawaii, known as the Big Island. The*

coqui frog does not have a tadpole stage like some other frogs, so it does not need ponds for its lifecycle, says Mautz.

So *Eleutherodactylus coqui* settled on the Big Island in a big way, with population densities fully three times their density back home in Puerto Rico, said Mautz. One of the highest counts researchers found in one study was 91,000 frogs per hectare (about 2.5 acres.)

But the coqui did not find love among the humans of Hawaii. In contrast with Puerto Rico, the Big Island is a very quiet place, perhaps one of the quietest inhabited places on earth. And now there were coquies, described by National Geographic as the loudest amphibian in the world, disrupting that tranquility.

And because of the coquies voracious consumption of insects, there was concern about their impact on the things that are truly beloved in Hawaii, birds and real estate. Who would buy a property of starry nights and kitchen blenders.

By 2005, a study by the U.S. Department of Agriculture National Wildlife Research Center was describing a full-fledged "coqui frog invasion." The Mayor of Hilo on the Big Island, declared a coqui state of emergency, a "threat to the economic welfare of the Island of Hawaii."

"The nice thing about living in Hawaii," said Waimea realtor Stacy Disney, "is you get to have windows open year round. People enjoy the quiet and nature, and basically the coqui frog ruins it. As a realtor, I worry that people will call me up two years after a sale and tell me 'I can't stand it, get me out of here.' I'm not showing your neighborhood if you have coqui frogs for that reason." The Hawaii home sellers disclosure form includes a disclosure check box for coquis, along with other noisy menaces, like nightclubs.

The infestations could also put pressure on Hawaiian ecosystems. The coqui frog competes with native species that depend on insects for food, including various endemic birds and the highly endangered Hawaiian fruit bat.

Mautz, the biologist, worries about another scenario, which would be disastrous for Hawaii. Right now, there are no snakes in Hawaii. But if snakes were to somehow show up — in the same way the coqui showed up, in a shipment from someplace else — a species like the brown tree snake would feast on the coquies. They could thrive and grow and get bigger and then feed on the birds. "The brown tree snake is something we really fear here in Hawaii," he said.



Kathy Rawle is a co-founder of one of many neighborhood-watch type organizations on the Big Island, watching not for criminals but for coquies. Her's is called "Coqui-Free Waimea" and features as its logo a pitiful coqui, arms and legs splayed, underneath the circle-and-slash symbol that means, throughout the world, "no."

Mautz thinks the coqui eradication efforts will prove futile. He thinks they are "here to stay."

Meanwhile, he notes, younger generations of Hawaiians who have grown up with the sound of the coqui ringing in their ears are "getting used to it."

A story in West Hawaii Today last year, "People growing tolerant of coqui frogs," reported on a study showing just what Mautz said, that people are "beginning to tolerate the frogs," as researcher Emily A. Kalnicky told the paper. "It seems there is a relationship between peoples's attitudes and the number of frogs in a given area. It was the opposite of what we expected. People with a lot of frogs had a more positive attitude about them .... They're getting used to them being there."