

NEWSBRIEFS

Turtle Survival Alliance — 4th Annual Conference

The Turtle Survival Alliance (TSA) is pleased to announce their 4th Annual Conference, hosted by the St. Louis Zoo on 10–13 August 2006 in St. Louis, Missouri. Expanding to a full three-day format, this will be a joint conference with the IUCN Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group (TFTSG). In addition to oral presentations, a special poster session/social will allow greater involvement of participants. To encourage participation by students, the Chelonian Research Foundation will award \$250 prizes for best student presentations. Attendance and presentations at the Conference are open to all interested individuals.

The keynote speaker will be Ed Moll, co-author of the book *Ecology, Exploitation, and Conservation of River Turtles*, co-author and brother Don Moll also will speak. Ed is recognized as one of the foremost leaders in turtle conservation, and “sounded the alarm” years before the Asian turtle crisis was widely publicized. He was also the first Chairman of the TFTSG. Peter Pritchard will be the banquet speaker. Additional speakers will be posted on the TSA web

site as the program develops. Registration information is available on the TSA website (<http://www.turtlesurvival.org/>).

Public Outraged at Assault on Sea Turtle Protection

Public comments received by the Pacific Fisheries Management Council about its 9 March final vote to allow drift gillnets, also known as “curtains of death,” and longlines back into vast protected areas along the Pacific Coast expresses overwhelming public opposition to industry efforts to gut successful conservation measures that protected critically endangered Leatherback Sea Turtles. By the close of the 15 February public comment period, the Council received comments at a ratio of about 2,200 to 1 not to proceed with the expansion of these two destructive fishing practices that injure and kill large numbers of sea turtles, marine mammals, seabirds, and valuable non-target fish. In addition, a unique coalition of ten recreational fishing, animal welfare, and marine conservation groups with about 9 million members are working to oppose the measure.

“It’s time for the Council and NOAA Fisheries to listen to the public and enforce their mandate to protect the

public interest,” said Robert Ovetz, Ph.D., Save the Leatherback Campaign Coordinator with the Sea Turtle Restoration Project, “And the public interest is keeping Leatherback Sea Turtles and other marine species from going extinct and prevent overfishing.”

The United Nations banned drift-nets on the high seas in 1991 and the U.S. has followed with recent closures to large areas in U.S. waters, including the time and area closures along the Pacific Coast. Since 2001, areas north of Point Conception to an intersect with the Oregon coast have been closed to drift gillnet fishing from 15 August through 15 November in order to protect endangered Leatherback and Loggerhead sea turtles. During the past three years of closure, this fishery, which targets swordfish with drift gillnet gear, has had no recorded takes of Leatherback Sea Turtles. Longline fishing, which is also one of the main threats to Leatherback Sea Turtles, was banned along the U.S. West Coast in 2004.

Since 2002, 64 dolphins, whales, seals, and sea lions have been killed by the drift gillnet fishery in the West Coast areas still open to gillnetting. Additionally, seabirds including Northern Fulmars and Cassin’s Auklet have been injured or killed.

The proposed exemption would allow as many as two-thirds of the remaining 36 drift-gillnet vessels and between 71 and 131 longline vessels into the closed areas. “Drift-gillnet and longlines are subsidized unprofitable industries looking for a hand-out at the expense of endangered species like Leatherback Sea Turtles, Humpback Whales, and sharks. The public has spoken. It’s time for the government to listen,” added Ovetz.

Resources include the scientist letter (http://www.seaturtles.org/pdf/___Scient.ltr.PFMC.final.pdf), the NGO coalition letter (http://www.seaturtles.org/pdf/_NGO.letter.2.final.pdf), and information about the Pacific Fisheries Management Council meeting (<http://www.pcouncil.org/bb/2005/bb1105.html>).

Robert Ovetz (robert@seaturtles.org)
Sea Turtle Restoration Project
2 March 2006



BRIAN HOWIE

The Indian Red-crowned Roofed Turtle (*Kachuga kachuga*) is one of many Asian Turtle species that will be discussed at the August TSA Conference.

Roti Island Snake-necked Turtles All but Extinct

The Roti Island Snake-necked Turtle (*Chelodina mccordi*) is a small, long-necked turtle found only in the wetlands of Roti Island in eastern Indonesia. Since this endemic turtle was described as a new species in 1994, international demand for it has intensified to the point where the species has become all but extinct in the wild. No legal trade of this species from Indonesia has been allowed since 2001. Prior to its description, it was exported illegally as another species, the New Guinea Snake-necked Turtle (*C. novaeguineae*), which has been protected in Indonesia since 1980.

A new TRAFFIC report determined that the capture and trade of these animals has not been carried out in accordance with relevant Indonesian laws.



BONGGI IBARRONDO



BONGGI IBARRONDO



CHRIS R. SHEPHERD

Roti Island Snake-necked Turtles (*Chelodina mccordi*) are found only in the wetlands of Roti Island in eastern Indonesia.



BONGGI IBARRONDO

A trap used to capture *Chelonia mccordi* in a freshwater swamp on Roti Island.

Despite national quotas set for harvest and export of *C. mccordi* between 1997 and 2001, no licenses for collection or transport permits have been issued to date. All specimens of *C. mccordi* that have been exported since 1994 have been illegally acquired.

In 2000, the IUCN Red List categorized the species as “Critically Endangered,” and the Roti Island Snake-necked Turtle was assessed as commercially extinct that same year. The species is listed in Appendix II of CITES, which requires any international trade to be carried out under a permitting system.

However, the continuing international demand from hobbyists and collectors in Europe, North America, and eastern Asia is pushing this endemic species toward extinction. Even if *C. mccordi* is added to the Indonesian list of protected species, monitoring and enforcement of existing laws are lacking and, in some places, non-existent. If these laws, such as those governing capture and transport of wildlife, are not enforced, this species will surely become extinct in the wild in the very near future.

Chris R. Shepherd
www.traffic.org
Jakarta, Indonesia
2 February 2006

Fear for the Turtle

Worried that a growing market for the meat of Diamondback Terrapins may

wipe out a symbol of Maryland, some state legislators are proposing to outlaw harvesting the turtle in the Chesapeake Bay.

But watermen and the state Department of Natural Resources are fighting an outright ban, arguing that terrapins are not endangered and that more modest state regulations restricting the catch would make more sense.

“I think this subject is important because the terrapin is in decline once again,” said Del. Virginia P. Claggett, an Anne Arundel Democrat who is one of 18 sponsors of House Bill 980, which would prohibit the catching of terrapins. “Any species lost is a real loss, but this also happens to be the state icon.”

Claggett said she finds it frustrating that neighboring Virginia — which does not feature the “Terp” as the proud mascot of its state university — outlaws the commercial harvest of terrapins, but Maryland does not. “If they can do it, we can do it,” she said.

At the center of the debate, which flared before the House Environmental Matters Committee recently, is the unanswered question of how many terrapins still swim in the bay, and whether their numbers are really falling or rising.

The shy reptiles — up to 9 inches long, with distinctive diamond-shaped growth rings on their shells — live in coastal waters from Massachusetts to Texas, but historically have been found in greatest numbers in the Chesapeake Bay. Considered a delicacy in soup, they were harvested nearly to extinction at the end of the 19th century.

Howard King, director of fisheries at the DNR, said that perhaps hundreds of thousands of terrapins remain in the Maryland portion of the bay. Local watermen, who often catch them in their fishing nets by accident, sell between 5,000 and 12,000 pounds of the turtles every year, King said. The turtles weigh between 1 and 4 pounds each.

More than 2,000 watermen have licenses from the state that allow the catching of the turtles, as well as other marine life. But only five to nine watermen specialize in catching terrapins, mostly around Smith Island and Tangier Sound, King said.

The state imposes no limit on the number of terrapins that a person with a license can catch, and the season lasts



SUZANNE L. COLLINS, CHIAH

Marguerite Whilden, a former DNR fisheries manager who now directs a nonprofit conservation organization called the Terrapin Institute, estimates that as many as 20,000 Diamondback Terrapins (*Malaclemys terrapin*) have been netted in the Chesapeake Bay in the last two years, and that perhaps only 35,000 remain.

three-quarters of the year, from 1 August through 30 April.

As an alternative to a moratorium imposed by legislation, the Department of Natural Resources may propose limiting the season, capping the catch or reducing the number of watermen with terrapin licenses, King said.

"It's hard to tell if they are declining or not," King said. "The terrapin issue is certainly not critical. They deserve conservation, but the population is not at a critically low level."

Marguerite Whilden, a former DNR fisheries manager who now directs a nonprofit conservation organization called the Terrapin Institute, says a growing market for terrapin meat among Chinese restaurants and consumers in Asia is a threat to the turtles.

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"We used to be called the Terrapin State. It's an embarrassment that we've been so complacent, and that they are much more concerned about the terrapin in Virginia," Whilden said. "It's a very persistent creature, but once it's gone, it's gone. It can't be raised from the dead."

Her organization is offering to buy terrapins from watermen at market rate — which is about \$4–6 per turtle — so she can return them to the bay. If the state bans terrapin harvesting altogether,

Whilden said, her organization would pay to compensate the watermen.

Larry Simns, president of the Maryland Watermen's Association, said he would support capping terrapin harvests at current levels, but not outlawing catching them. "I think terrapins have been doing better the last five or six years. They're not threatened at all," Simns said. "Every time you lose part of your paycheck, it hurts."

Tom Pelton
Baltimore Sun
21 March 2006

Dogs Kill Blue Iguanas

Two Cayman Blue Iguanas (*Cyclura lewisi*) were killed at the Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park this week, a pregnant female has been mauled, and a fourth iguana is missing. Wild dogs caused the casualties.

Fred Burton, director of the Blue Iguana Recovery Program, identified the dead iguanas as Slugger and Sapphire, both pioneers in the Program to help bring the Blues back from near-extinction. "These two were the most photographed iguanas on the planet," Mr. Burton said. He explained that they were both born in captivity in 1997 and released into the 65-acre park in 1999. "They were not tame, but they were not afraid of people. They were like ambassa-

dors. Thousands of visitors admired them and took their pictures, which are now all over the world," Mr. Burton said.

Another 26 Blue Iguanas roam freely in the park, he indicated. The deaths highlight what could be a long-term problem for the park and a situation with irresponsible pet owners.

Slugger was buried Tuesday morning while park staff and iguana volunteers continued to look for his mate, Yellow-Blue, who was not in her nesting area. She came back late Tuesday, badly injured but determined to finish nesting, Mr. Burton said. She is missing half of her tail and her back right foot. She is expected to lay her eggs in the next few days. Until then, Mr. Burton is reluctant to interfere. Iguanas have an amazing immune system and the risk of infection is not great, he said. After she finishes preparing her nest, she will go underground for a few days. When the eggs are laid, she will come out and go on a feeding spree and Mr. Burton will look at her more closely then. Right now, it's better to let nature take its course.

But a fourth iguana, Santa, has been missing for several weeks and Mr. Burton wonders if he was an earlier victim to the dogs.

The problem was realized in earnest Monday morning, when a staff member was checking the grounds before the park opened to the public. He noticed two dogs down by the lake and went to chase them away. They ran into the bush in the east and it was then he found Sapphire. She was badly bitten and died a couple of hours later.



Fred Burton examines Slugger on the Botanic Park facility's porch where Slugger was observed regularly.

"This was a red alert," Mr. Burton said. The Department of Agriculture was contacted and officers took another dog trap to the park to go with the one already on the premises. On Monday night the traps were set and Mr. Burton waited until the iguanas went into their retreats. Slugger liked to spend the night under a plywood ramp leading to public toilets near the iguana facility and Mr. Burton saw him go there around sundown.

It rained Tuesday night and the bait probably washed out of the dog traps, he said. On Tuesday morning, Chris Carr came early to check the traps. Instead, he saw digging marks by the ramp. He checked more closely and saw two dogs under the toilet building with an iguana. Mr. Carr was able to retrieve the iguana. It was Slugger, and he was dead.

Mr. Burton said Slugger would not have been afraid of the dogs, probably

never having seen one before. "He was the dominant male in the area. He would have stayed and fought," he said. Although he was the largest iguana in the park at over 17 pounds, he was no match for the dogs. "If we succeed in catching the dogs, we'll have to put them down," Mr. Burton said. It was not clear whether they belonged to anyone. They did not have collars and did not act as if they had any training, he indicated.

But along with the dogs, irresponsible pet owners are causing another monstrous problem for the wildlife in the park. "Well-meaning people are bringing animals to the park and abandoning them, thinking park staff will be kind to animals. We have found kittens, full-grown cats, puppies, and Green Iguanas (*Iguana iguana*), and we have absolutely no option but to trap them and remove them. "They have no place here and

they're damaging the native wildlife we're trying so hard to protect," Mr. Burton said.

Especially worrisome are the Green Iguanas. People think they're cute when they're little. But then they grow into big lizards and the owner doesn't want them any more. The Green Iguanas – with definite black stripes on the tail – are not native to Cayman, he emphasized. They don't belong here and they are a threat to the vulnerable Blues.

If anything good can come out of this experience, maybe it could be people's increased awareness of what happens when they allow their pets to roam or when they drop off unwanted animals. "Please don't bring animals to the park. It's not a home for them," he urged.

Carol Winker

Cayman Webnet, 7 June 2006

O B I T U A R Y

Ronald Goellner (1945–2006)

With great sadness I report the death of Ron Goellner, Director of Animal Collections at the Saint Louis Zoo. Ron passed away early in the morning of 26 February 2006, in the comfort of his home and with his loving wife Karen at his side. The entire Saint Louis Zoo community is profoundly saddened by the loss of a man who touched the lives of so many, yet we know that Ron would be the first to tell us to "keep smilin'." You cannot conjure memories of Ron and not follow his advice, because he sowed smiles wherever he went.



Ron Goellner, here holding a Hellbender (*Cryptobranchus alleganiensis*), founded the Center for Hellbender Conservation. Photograph courtesy of the St. Louis Zoo.

Born 4 November 1945, Ron's career at the Saint Louis Zoo spanned 35 years. He started in the Reptile House in 1970 as a keeper and, within a few years, was promoted to Curator of Reptiles, a position he held until 1995. For the past ten years, Ron served as the Director of Animal Collections for the zoo. Although Ron was intensely interested in all reptiles and amphibians, his true passions were Tuataras and Hellbenders. In 1980, Ron traveled to Stephen's Island in New Zealand to collect environmental data that could be utilized in the construction of a new off-exhibit enclosure for the Zoo's Tuatara group, which has been in the collection since 1973. In recent years, Ron founded the Center for Hellbender Conservation, which included the construction of a dedicated off-exhibit facility for captive propagation efforts. In addition, he established valuable links with the Missouri Department of Conservation and researchers at universities in order to implement cooperative *in situ* initiatives for the Hellbender in Missouri.

Ron was an avid gardener and had built several ponds around his house to attract local amphibians. He enjoyed a wide array of outdoor activities and particularly loved camping in the Big Bend region of Texas and the mountains of southeastern Arizona.

Ron was my mentor and colleague, but most of all he was a dear friend whom I will miss very much.

Jeff Ertling

Curator of Herpetology
Saint Louis Zoo