

O B I T U A R Y

John Thorbjarnarson

(1957–2010)¹

The conservation community sustained a great loss on 14 February 2009. John Thorbjarnarson died tragically in New Delhi, India of advanced falciparum malaria likely contracted in Uganda while working to save the animals he loved. John served as Senior Conservation Officer of the Wildlife Conservation Society since 1993. He also was an Adjunct Assistant Professor at Columbia University.

John T., as he was better known to friends and colleagues, was primarily known and respected as one of the world's premier crocodylian biologists; his research encompassed reproductive ecology, diet, feeding behavior, movement patterns, habitat use, social behavior, and population dynamics. However, research for him was not purely an academic endeavor. He utilized his findings to help develop conservation programs for endangered species. His approach, based on the sustainable use of reptiles through community-based programs, was both innovative and effective.

“What a real tragedy this is,” says Grahame Webb, chair of the IUCN Crocodile Specialist Group. “At a personal level, JT was truly admired and a friend of so many. At a professional level, you just cannot replace people like JT... I do not believe the world will ever again allow individuals to learn so much about crocodiles in the field and then craft that knowledge over years so it becomes effective at the front line... He was one of the most careful of scientists, who through WCS was doing more on crocodile conservation around the world than any other individual has done in the past — or will do in the future.”

John also will be mourned by his colleagues in chelonian conservation. He was a major contributor to the book *Turtle Conservation* by Michael Klemens, but he will be remembered best for spearheading the organization of a workshop in China to begin development of a strategic plan for saving *Rafetus*. This workshop — and the resulting China Softshell Turtle guide — ultimately led to the discovery of the Changsha Zoo female and involvement of the Turtle Survival Alliance (TSA). John also co-authored a seminal 2003 paper in *Chelonian Conservation and Biology* that provided a thoughtful analysis ranking Asian countries in order of their importance for turtle conservation. That paper essentially became the organizing principle behind the TSA's Asian field program.

Anders Rhodin, chair of the IUCN Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group, eloquently reflected on John's passing: “I echo the sentiments of others as I stop to reflect on the dedication to conservation, crocodiles, and turtles that John had, and how he was always traveling to the ends of the earth and into wilderness regions to pursue his passion and work. His energy and devotion will indeed be sorely missed... John loved his work and I'm sure he would not have changed what he did.”

John is perhaps best described in the words of his nephew, writer Andri Magnason: “He was a scientist, specialized in cold-blooded animals but himself full of warmth with a strong human touch — he could act as a peacekeeper between people and the



creatures they feared the most, he could eliminate prejudice and create understanding for the graceful but unpopular creatures in the crocodile family. He could get people to understand that a crocodile is a healthy sign in an ecosystem — not some kind of a pest to be exterminated. By destroying the habitat of the crocodile, the wetlands, swamps, and rivers, people would eventually harm their own existence. He was realistic and understood that people needed a source of living — and by promoting sustainable hunting, the long term benefit of a species could be secured.”

John's passing leaves a tremendous void in the lives of those with whom he worked and in the projects he spearheaded. He was a passionate advocate for conservation and is simply irreplaceable. His legacy will be the remarkable number of young and aspiring biologists that he trained and mentored. His work truly spanned the globe with projects in South America (most notably Brazil), Asia (including pioneering work in Burma, China, and Cambodia), Africa, and the Caribbean (especially Cuba). A special session paying tribute to the life of John T. is being planned for the upcoming TSA conference in Orlando.

¹ Adapted from obituaries and remembrances by Rick Hudson, Chuck Shaffer, and Andri Magnason.