

# CONSERVATION

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## PERSPECTIVES IN CONSERVATION: An Interview with Rick Hudson

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PHOTO BY CHRISTINA CASTELLANO



Rick Hudson with Radiated Tortoise, Madagascar 2011.

I am fortunate to have carved out a rather unique niche for myself here at the Fort Worth Zoo. I've been here 36 years. The first 20 were in the Department of Herpetology, and the past 16 years have been in the Department of Conservation and Science.

My job description here at Fort Worth Zoo states that I provide leadership to both the TSA and IIF, so it's a very unique

position that reflects the Fort Worth Zoo's long-standing commitment to conservation. They support my salary to spearhead two nonprofit foundations, an arrangement that benefits both the Zoo and the reptile conservation community.

### What encouraged your interest in herpetology, specifically the species you are working to protect?

My earliest memory when I was four years old was at the National Zoo. I was raised in a small town in rural southern Virginia, in the Blue Ridge Mountains, so I grew up in the woods catching salamanders, frogs, turtles, snakes, and lizards. Everybody in town knew me as the reptile kid. I had a little backyard zoo behind my home where all this stuff was on display, and we'd charge a nickel for kids to come and see it.

When I was twelve years old, the local newspaper interviewed me about my backyard zoo and asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up, and I said I wanted to become a naturalist and work in a real zoo. I know very few people that ended up doing exactly what they said they wanted to do when they were twelve, so I kind of grew up knowing that I was headed for the zoo world.

I got a little side-tracked in college and pursued the pre-veterinary angle. My grades were less than stellar, so once I got my degree in biology, I pursued a zoo career. I wasn't getting my foot in the door so I went back to get an associate degree in veterinary technology, and the head of the program at the time, Dr. Stuart Porter, had been a zoo vet at the Gladys Porter Zoo in Texas and at the Memphis Zoo. Stuart still had connections to the zoo world and convinced me he could open doors for me.

I went through the program and did an internship at the Baltimore Zoo with the veterinarian there, and when I graduated I began applying for jobs both in reptiles and veterinary departments in zoos. The day that changed my life was in August 1980 when I got the call from the Fort Worth Zoo that I had been hired as the Asst. Curator of Reptiles. I had interviewed at Fort Worth in June 1980, then they hired Dave Blody as Curator in August. He hired me sight unseen just based on a phone interview, and that was my first full-time zoo job. I started in September of 1980, and the rest is history.

**Your career path took you to the Fort Worth Zoo. Once there, what prompted you to organize the Turtle Survival Alliance (TSA) and International Iguana Foundation (IIF)?**

Allow me to ramble for a while, because I've spent 20 years in the FWZ reptile department, and during that time, Dave Blody and I built an amazing collection. We had people from all over the world visiting the Herpetarium, which was rather legendary among zoo people. So many of the icons in our field passed through there as part of the staff: Mehrtens, Laszlo, Campbell, Tryon, Heckard. I don't think that any zoo had ever built a collection that impressive in terms of breeding successes. It was a diverse and rare collection—pretty much a herper's dream—managed in a very old, poorly insulated building. We just figured out how to use the temperature variations of that building to our advantage. There was nothing you couldn't breed in that building once you understood their biology.

Dave Blody was my mentor. He was a "reptile husbandry savant," and was the one who taught me the importance of thermal regimes and monitoring temperatures. He was absolutely obsessive about the influence of temperatures on husbandry and reproduction. He was a gifted and talented person, especially when it came to naturalistic exhibit design. Plus he had a near photographic memory. Dave and I complemented each other very well. He was the creative spark, and I was the force that made things happen, so we had a good working relationship. In the mid-to late 1980s when zoos started moving towards conservation, I got involved at that level as the first-ever studbook keeper for a snake, the Dumeril's Ground Boa from Madagascar. My early zoo conservation work was with the Crocodylian Advisory Group. Crocs were really my first love. I moved on to lizards, and became chair of the AZA Lizard Advisory Group. I was the founder and organizer of that group and our initial focus was on the lizards of the Caribbean in 1990. Obviously *Cyclura* were a major focus.

We started building a captive population of Grand Cayman Iguanas, but then in 1990, the Jamaican Iguana was rediscovered. That's really the single event that energized my career. I organized a Population and Habitat Viability Assessment workshop in Kingston in 1993, and brought together the leading iguana experts in the world to figure out a conservation strategy for the species. A remnant population had been found clinging to existence in the Hellshire Hills, with two active nesting sites. About 40 hatchlings had been collected from these sites in 1991 and 1992, and these were kept at the Hope Zoo in Kingston.

That meeting was catalytic in a number of ways. 1993 changed me in a way that solidified my bond with iguanas. I remember sitting in an enclosure in the Hope Zoo surrounded by twenty or thirty yearling or two-year-old iguanas, and just the way they looked at you and cocked their head. Not to be anthropomorphic, but with monitors and iguanas and many lizards really, it's easy to feel like you are making eye contact. Just the way they look at you really struck a chord with me.

I made this visceral connection at that time, and decided that this is where I need to be. That was followed by going to Cuba with Allison Alberts and her group from San Diego Zoo's Center for Reproduction of Endangered Species, and helping with their research on Cuban Iguanas at Guantanamo Bay. I recall sitting at this place on the coast called Firing Point, where all these large male Cuban Iguanas congregated and guarded these tiny territories. Watching them communicate via head-bob and posture, I

was hooked. Those events ignited a passion in me that continues today, some 23 years later.

I've been working on Jamaican Iguanas for 25 years, and the recovery effort has been incredibly successful, thanks to the collective dedication of a lot of individuals and organizations. We have reintroduced 315 iguanas to the Hellshire Hills over the past 20 years, and had our eyes on restoring them to Goat Island, part of their historical range. That was our end game: a sustainable wild population of iguanas that was not conservation dependent. So when we were faced with losing this island to a Chinese development, it was devastating. You think about 25 years of your life's work going down the drain, so yeah, it's been an emotional roller coaster for the past three years. We fought the good fight and brought this issue to the world's attention and created a sense of outrage, both locally and internationally. And in the end, we prevailed, but it was a struggle with huge odds stacked against us. I'll talk more about that later.

**It sounds like the foundation of your success is your passion for these programs and for the animals, along with understanding the importance of long term commitments, but what do you feel has made these programs so successful today?**

Well, my passion does come through when I'm fundraising. I think people get that, that this is not just some talking head trying to raise money, but somebody who really has an emotional investment in those programs, so I think that helps. I do convey that passion when I'm talking about what we do, but really, our success is based on some amazing partnerships. I am surrounded by really good people who share my passion and vision. It's greater than the sum of its parts. We've put really good people together and made things happen.

The TSA is a good example of that. When news of the Asian Turtle Crisis first hit in the mid 1990s, there was a lot of anger and frustration, and there were a lot of passionate people who wanted to do something. I could sense that so we hosted a workshop in 2001 at the Fort Worth Zoo that brought together 80 turtle specialists from around the world, representing multiple sectors. The first two days were a complete failure but on Day 3, we managed to come together and find common ground and the TSA was born. More than anything I think TSA was able to harness the energy and passion that was out there, and began building partnerships for turtle conservation. It started out all about captive breeding and building assurance colonies but grew into something much bigger. We now have field programs and staff in about ten countries that are addressing the threats on the ground and implementing *in situ* conservation programs. However, assurance colonies remain a core part of the TSA program, and the Turtle Survival Center in South Carolina is the embodiment of that concept. I have to say that I am as proud of the TSC as anything that we have done as an organization. It's been all-consuming though.

With iguanas, I'd say my partnership with Allison Alberts was probably one of the more productive relationships to come out of the zoo world at that time. Starting in 1993 with the group of people that convened in Kingston, Jamaica, we guided the transformation of that group into the Iguana Specialist Group (ISG) that is so active today. And though Allison and I provided the leadership to the ISG for many years, we were fortunate to have a group of highly motivated, hard working, and passionate biologists behind us that launched the ISG as a true force for

iguana conservation. John Iverson, Stesha Pasachnik, Tandora Grant, Glenn Gerber, Chuck Knapp: you can't lose with people like that. It soon became obvious that while the ISG was long on expertise, it was always short on money, so we organized the International Iguana Foundation in 2001 to provide financial security to some of our core programs. We really changed the extinction trajectory for several species. Iguanas respond well to conservation management and certainly appear hard-wired for release after a life in captivity. Since 2001, the IIF has raised over US \$2 million for iguana conservation and our annual grants program increases each year.

Though we certainly don't have all the funding we need, it has allowed us to branch out beyond the big three *Cyclura* species that were facing extinction at the time. Now we're working on Spiny-tailed Iguanas and Fiji Iguanas, as well as some of the lesser-known forms. When the IIF first formed, we were focused on Grand Cayman, Jamaican, and Anegada iguanas, the ones that were about ready to blink out. Through intensive management techniques such as nest protection, head-starting, captive breeding, and reintroduction, we've moved those species to where we don't have that huge sense of urgency now. We have these species on the road to recovery. Their numbers are up. We have been breathing a sigh of relief, but that is probably premature because as we saw in Jamaica, the battles are never fully won. The Jamaican and Anegada iguanas are still conservation-dependent, they still require interventions such as predator removal, and head-start and release to sustain their populations, but we've made some incredible progress.

I go back to my partnership with Allison Alberts. Allison is now the Director of Conservation Research at the San Diego Zoo. She's been with San Diego since I've known her, but that partnership has been catalytic. From a big picture perspective, and in terms of zoo-based conservation, I don't think there is another vertebrate group that comes close to iguanas in terms of success stories. All of the recovery programs, and certainly much of the conservation and research work, is spearheaded by zoos and groups like ISG and IIF, which are led by zoo biologists. Zoos have really bought in to iguana conservation because it's obvious they can have an impact on the survival of species.

### What have been some of your greatest learning experiences in conservation through these programs?

What's become obvious to me is that the battle to save species needs to be fought at the community level. That's why I think sometimes small conservation groups are actually more effective than large ones because a lot less money gets used at the top. It trickles down to the bottom where it's most needed and that is locally, with the people that share the environment with the species. These battles are going to be won or lost at the community level, and that has become abundantly clear to me with TSA's tortoise conservation program in Madagascar. If we can't inspire communities to protect local populations of Radiated Tortoises and habitat from poachers, then that species doesn't have a chance. We work a lot at the community level in Madagascar to build those relations, to incentivize them. We built a school in one community that was doing such a good job of protecting tortoises. We asked them what they wanted, what they needed? They said a school, so we built them a school.

That school has really become a regional model for demonstrating how protecting tortoises can benefit the community. Local politicians stood up at the opening ceremony

and extolled the value of protecting tortoises, as a means of providing benefit to the community. The reason that Radiated Tortoises are still so abundant in that core part of the range in southern Madagascar is because two of the tribes there have a traditional taboo against harming tortoises. But though they may not harm tortoises, and they don't want to handle them, some will allow outside groups of poachers to come in that don't share that traditional taboo, and they will allow them to take tortoises. What we're trying to do is to get back to the observance of the traditional *fady*, and incentivize communities to keep poachers out and to report poaching activity. We've got a really amazing informant network now in the south of Madagascar and we've got an enforcement guy there who's putting his life at risk nearly every week chasing down poachers, bringing them to justice, putting people in jail, and confiscating tortoises. I'm going to nominate him for a major conservation award next year, because he absolutely puts his life on the line for tortoises.

I guess I should go back and reflect on what works. It's always about people. You've heard it many times before, that conservation is more about managing people than it is animals, and that's certainly true. I consider our Myanmar turtle conservation program as exemplary. First, it's a partnership with the Wildlife Conservation Society, which provides the TSA with a lot of support and credibility with the Myanmar government. We've got two people there, Kalyar and Steve Platt, who are just amazing—the hardest-working people I know. They're incredibly focused and energetic individuals, and seem to be everywhere at once. If TSA had these people in every country in Asia, we'd all sleep a lot better at night. They just get things done, and in my work you just don't find that every day. We have some exceptional people, though. We have a colleague in Bangladesh, Rupali Ghosh, who I describe as a force of nature. She has an amazing ability to work under adverse circumstances and get results. Kalyar and Steve are the same—both are forces of nature. It takes people like that to sustain and grow these programs and make them successful. If you don't have those types of people, you can throw a lot of money at the problem, but it's unlikely to be very effective.

Over the years I think I've developed a pretty good eye for talent and spotting individuals that I think are special. You look at countries like Indonesia and Malaysia where biology and natural history are not really encouraged at the university level, but every once in a while a shining star emerges. It's happened with us in India with Shailendra Singh. Now we have a guy in Sumatra—Joko Guntoro—who, like Shai, just seems to come by this stuff instinctively. They see what needs to be done and they start from scratch to build these programs with few resources. Growing up in a poor country forces one to be resourceful.

Once you find somebody like that, we have a profound responsibility to support them. You've got to mentor them, get them trained, provide them with resources, and let them do their thing. That's one of my strong suits—recognizing those types of individuals and then bringing them into the fold.

### A few of the programs that you spearhead have recently had big successes. Could you talk to us about these accomplishments?

The two that are fresh on my mind right now, of course, are Madagascar and Jamaica. We just returned from Madagascar where we opened the Tortoise Conservation Center, which is the critical piece in our *confiscation to reintroduction strategy*. When

we started work in the south doing the awareness campaign and the enforcement stuff, we knew we were going to have confiscated tortoises. We just didn't anticipate how many.

We started building tortoise rescue centers, five in total, and those are already at maximum capacity just from the overwhelming number of confiscations. We are simply becoming overwhelmed with the surge in poaching activity. But we can't continue to keep all these tortoises in makeshift facilities that were designed for temporary holding. We knew a couple of years ago we needed to build a large center where we could bring these animals, let them settle in, and where we could better plan reintroductions, because we've got to get these animals back out into protected areas. But planning those re-introductions requires time, and you need to make sure that you've found the right site. The best sites have supportive communities nearby.

That's the whole vision behind the Tortoise Conservation Center. It gives us a base of operations in the south to reach out to communities, and to rehab tortoises. I mean, make no mistake, Madagascar's in the middle of a tortoise refugee crisis. The animals are pouring in. We're caring for over 6000 Radiated Tortoises in six locations in Madagascar. It's overwhelming our resources. I just came back from Madagascar and realized I need to hire a lot more people. I've got to give salary raises to the ones who are breaking their neck for us, so we've got to really ramp up that program. Right now, Madagascar's is one of TSA's best-funded program, but it's got to keep growing.

The importance of the Center was underscored by the fact that the Minister of Environment showed up for the grand opening and did the ribbon-cutting ceremony. A host of other dignitaries, local and national, also attended and toured the Center. With the tortoise poaching crisis having reached epidemic proportions, it's getting some attention from politicians. It's a big issue and we are finally getting some support there.

The other amazing news is the fact that the habitat for the Jamaican Iguana and the Goat Islands have been spared from development, at least for now. We had targeted the Goat Islands for restoration as an iguana sanctuary. About three years ago, the Jamaican government announced that they were going to turn over the Goat Islands to a Chinese development corporation to do a logistics hub or trans-shipment port. Basically, they were going to install a massive development in the middle of Jamaica's largest protected area, which includes the Hellshire Hills that supports the last iguana population in Jamaica. But the Goat Islands were always our target. Most of the goats are gone and the vegetation is recovering. Now we just need to get the mongoose off, which is not going to be cheap, but it's doable. Bottom line: we could have a robust and self-sustaining population of iguanas that is not dependent on the constant interventions required to sustain the Hellshire population on the mainland. The numbers can build up naturally and we won't have to worry about predator control. It would eliminate our need for a head-starting program.

The Goat Islands have always been our endgame, so when the Jamaican government announced in 2013 that they were going to turn it over to the Chinese for development, it was gut-wrenching. This whole area had been proposed as a World Heritage Site, and they pulled that application off the table before they announced the deal with China.

We have been fighting this with everything we had. The International Iguana Foundation (IIF) sent filmmakers down, in particular Robin Moore (formerly of Conservation International), a conservation photographer with amazing talents. He went there twice to capture footage, to get the stories, and to help us

publicize this issue, and I think he's done an amazing job. The IIF got behind this campaign in a big way to help increase public awareness both globally and in Jamaica, and to fuel international outrage. We have a partner in Jamaica—the Jamaican Environmental Trust. Diana McCauley has been tenacious in terms of fighting this thing and demanding transparency from the government.

So for three years we've been fighting this, and for the past year it's been out of the news. No news is good news, right?

We haven't been hearing anything, and the political party that cut the deal with the Chinese got voted out of power, so we're thinking okay, maybe the deal is off the table.

Well, in early September, a Jamaican newspaper announces that the deal's back on and it's going through and so we're back in fight mode. Let's get another film out there and attack this thing again. But then about two weeks later, quite unceremoniously, the Jamaican Prime Minister was in New York for a U.N. meeting, and was holding a town hall meeting with some of his constituents. He was asked about the Goat Islands, and through a tweet we learned that the Jamaican government was not going to go through with this development, at least not on the Goat Islands. They admitted that other locations were more appropriate.

And that's what we had been saying all along. We're not anti-development. You just don't do it in the middle of Jamaica's largest protected area. Do it somewhere else that's less environmentally destructive. When the end came, when the announcement was made, it was a bit anti-climactic. I thought there'd be more fanfare but it was still a very good feeling. We're all still in a celebratory mood, because it's been a hard-fought battle. It got pretty ugly at times.

### Considering your career, is there any advice for future generations of herp-centered conservationists?

Well, I do feel like I'm living a dream sometimes. I have had the privilege of being part of the recovery efforts for some of the most endangered and charismatic reptiles in the world. As Augustus said to Woodrow in the movie *Lonesome Dove* "it's been a helluva ride." I guess you create your own luck, but I have the Fort Worth Zoo to thank for a lot of it. They allowed me enormous latitude to pursue my dreams and to do what I do.

Getting into the zoo business is a lot different these days. I didn't have an advanced degree. I was able to do what I've done without a Ph.D., but I don't know that you can do that today. I've been fortunate to be surrounded by good people who share my passion and vision.

You've just got to maintain that passion. The conservation business can be really depressing, and some people can't hack it. They get discouraged. It's often two steps forward, one step back, or worse. You've just got to stay optimistic. You've got to realize that if you weren't doing what you're doing, that things *would* be a lot worse. We have to celebrate those victories, and so when they come, as in Jamaica, you've really got to savor those moments, because they can be few and far between.

Wildlife's in trouble, but I know that the resources are out there to bring transformative change. It's a matter of matching resources with the need and finding the right people to drive it. We can save species but we are going to have to be innovative and creative, and understand which species can be preserved in man-altered environments. It's going to be challenging because big business and government are not on our side. And I worry that saving individual species is being loaded up more and more on

the backs of zoos, and they are getting overwhelmed. Most big conservation organizations are walking away from single species conservation, which is very disturbing. Because at the end of the day, if you are losing species, what is your metric for success? I have to give a shout out to the Wildlife Conservation Society for staying true to their mission and maintaining that focus on species.

We're fortunate with turtles because they're long-lived and resilient, and if we get them into breeding situations, no matter how low the numbers are, I think we can save them. When TSA made their bold commitment to zero turtle extinctions, it was a promise that I felt we could keep. Though the jury is still out on the future of the Yangtze Giant Softshell Turtle. But we are not going to go down without a fight. When you have Gerald Kuchling on your side, you don't give up. He is the world's leading chelonian reproductive biologist and is constantly innovating, so I remain optimistic despite the disappointments over the past eight years.

I don't envy my colleagues who are working with amphibians. The short generation times, the numbers of animals required for breeding, and the number of species needing help can be overwhelming. My hat's off to those people who are dealing with this crisis, because that's just a level of frustration that would be hard for me to handle.

To your question about advice for young people. I think at a young age you've got to find a zoo or wildlife organization that you want to work with and start volunteering. Get your foot in the door because a lot of times job opportunities don't come up unless you know somebody. Find a mentor and befriend people who are in the business so that when the opportunities come up, you will know about them.

Volunteer as much as you can at these organizations. Pursue an advanced degree. A passion for this work is critical, and will

come through to those around you. It's a tough business to be in, but I can't imagine doing anything else.

My role models have always been conservation people, and I guess I credit my development to the early influence of John Behler, the late Curator of Herpetology at Bronx Zoo/WCS. And Ulysses Seal, the late Chair of the IUCN Conservation Breeding Specialist Group. Both had different styles, but taught me how to attack conservation problems, how to marshal resources, how to bring people to the table, and how to get people to buy in to a common vision. That's what it's all about. It's getting people to share a common vision.

### **You've emphasized long-term commitment and cooperation as keys to success in these initiatives.**

There's something to be said for longevity, because you don't start seeing success for a number of years. Conservation is a long-term commitment. I've been at the Fort Worth Zoo for 36 years and doing conservation for probably 28 of those. I just have to give a big shout out to the Fort Worth Zoo for allowing me to do what I do. It's a unique situation.

If I live long enough to see these things come to fruition. I would like to see the Radiated Tortoise crisis abate. I'd love to see Jamaican Iguanas return to Goat Island. I hope to live long enough to see the culmination of some of our work. We're making great progress and we have a number of species recovery programs that you could term successful. But success can be elusive in conservation, and for many species there will be new threats to deal with. There is job security in the conservation business, as we will never be done!