

BEHLER AWARD



Russell A. Mittermeier, 2018 Behler Turtle Conservation Award Honoree

Anders G.J. Rhodin

This year, the 13th Annual Behler Turtle Conservation Award celebrates and honors Russell A. Mittermeier for his half-century of dedication to science and conservation of turtles and primates, as well as being a world-leading global conservationist of the highest caliber. The Behler Award is effectively the “Nobel Prize for Turtle Conservation and Biology”.

Russ has been a hard-core herpetologist since childhood, with a particular interest in turtles, snakes, and crocodylians. He spent his early years in the Bronx and Brooklyn, New York, where he was fortunate to have a mother that took him to the Bronx Zoo and the American Museum of Natural History on a weekly basis. At age 9, he moved to North Babylon, Long Island, NY where he became an avid collector of turtles, snakes, frogs, and salamanders, and a member of both the New York Herpetological Society and the Long Island Herpetological Society. A strong motivator for his life’s direction into the field of conservation came early on, as he witnessed the rapid transformation of the forests in his Long Island neighborhood into housing developments—eliminating the habitats for his favorite species.

Russ and I first met 50 years ago, in 1968, while attending Dartmouth College. As an undergraduate, he spent his sophomore year in Europe where he had his first serious interactions with professional herpetologists in Mainz and Frankfurt, Germany. Among them were Robert Mertens, Klaus Klemmer, Erhard Thomas, and especially Walter Sachsse. These interactions further strengthened his interest in turtles and herpetology. During this same period, he also began a strong focus in primatology through visiting zoos in 18 different countries, building on an incipient interest stimulated by his childhood fascination with Tarzan books and movies. As he pursued a focused study in primatol-



Russ Mittermeier enjoys a moment in time with a Madagascar Big-headed Turtle in the Analabe region of northwest Madagascar in 1985. PHOTO CREDIT: RUSS MITTERMEIER

ogy, we dreamt of going to Madagascar together to study lemurs. Following graduation, however, we instead carried out a joint exploration of Panama, Colombia, and the Brazilian Amazon that intensified his commitment to both turtles and primates.

Our paths continued to move in tandem when Russ entered graduate school at Harvard University in 1971 as a student of Biological Anthropology under primatologist Irvén DeVore. Despite his focus in primatology, Russ’ strong herpetological roots once again came to the fore, and he worked a great deal with Harvard herpetologist Ernest E. Williams. From 1971 to 1978, Williams gave Russ office space in the Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ), where I also happened to work as a Research Associate. Russ continues his relationship with the MCZ in the present day as a Research Fellow.

Not satisfied with just staying in an office during his time as a graduate student, Russ carried out field work in Panama, Tanzania, Peru, Colombia, Brazil, and Suriname. The work performed in Brazil was particularly interesting in that it included a long Amazonian expedition in 1973, following in the footsteps of the great 19th century explorers Henry Walter Bates and

Alfred Russel Wallace. This expedition included intensive research on both primates (especially the then virtually unknown uakaris and sakis) and herps. It led to a number of publications on Amazonian turtles, the most notable of which was the redescription of the Red-headed Amazon Sideneck Turtle (*Podocnemis erythrocephala*). From 1975–1977, Russ did his doctoral dissertation work on the monkeys of Suriname, but also carried out studies on the two forest tortoises there. In 1976, Russ and I published our first description together of a new turtle, Parker’s Snake-necked Turtle (*Chelodina parkeri*) from New Guinea, and our careers began to take off.

Upon earning his Ph.D. from Harvard in 1977, Russ moved forward to the Department of Anatomical Sciences at the State University of New York at Stony Brook in early 1978. While there, he completed the first ever Global Strategy for Primate Conservation with several colleagues. This document caught the attention of the World Wildlife Fund–US, as well as the attention of renowned Amazon specialist, Thomas E. Lovejoy—the resultant of which was the creation of a Primate Program and a Primate Action Fund. The latter exists to present day, but now with Global Wildlife Conservation (GWC).

In 1989, after 11 years of concentrated focus on primates, turtles, Brazil, the Guianas, and Madagascar, Russ left WWF-US for Conservation International (CI). There, he embraced his title as President, a position that he occupied for 25 years, before transitioning to Executive Vice-Chair in 2014. At CI, he was the key figure in adapting Norman Myers' Biodiversity Hotspots concept into a core strategy for the organization for the next two decades, producing hugely successful fundraising results. From Myers' original 10 Hotspots, and then later 18, Russ and colleagues carried out research that eventually increased the number to 36. Russ also created the concepts of Megadiversity Countries and High Biodiversity Wilderness Areas as additional strategies for priority-setting, as well as worked with several colleagues to adapt these and the Hotspots concept for turtle priority-setting. Russ was also instrumental in the creation of funding mechanisms focused on Hotspots and Wilderness Areas, with these resulting in the creation of new protected areas around the tropical world. In the Guiana Shield region of South America alone, these top 8 million hectares.

Further portraying his commitment to global conservation, Russ has had a long history with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). He has served as Chair of the IUCN/SSC Primate Specialist Group since 1977, and in 1979 began a process with Ed Moll and Peter Pritchard that resulted in the creation of the IUCN Freshwater Chelonian Specialist Group in 1981. He served as that new group's first Vice Chair under Moll and has been on the Executive Committee of the combined IUCN Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group (TFTSG) ever since. During his time at CI, Russ was instrumental in getting that organization's Center for Applied Biodiversity Science to support a number of IUCN Specialist Groups, including both the Marine Turtle Specialist Group led by Rod Mast and the Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Group led by John Behler and myself. Other IUCN positions he has held include the Steering

Committee of the SSC since 1982, the IUCN Council from 2004 to 2012, and he was an IUCN Vice-President from 2008–2012.

In addition to these positions with the IUCN and its affiliates, Russ is also a long-time board member of the Turtle Survival Alliance, Turtle Conservancy, the Turtle Conservation Fund, and Chelonian Research Foundation. In 2001 he was in Fort Worth, Texas when the Turtle Survival Alliance was created as an IUCN Task Force of the TFTSG. Furthermore, he was instrumental in the creation of both the Turtle Conservation Fund and the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, that help to support turtle conservation work. Russ's most recent move brought him to Global Wildlife Conservation (GWC) as that organization's Chief Conservation Officer in December 2017. His work at GWC, as it has for the past 50 years, focuses heavily on tropical forests and primates, with a strong side interest in turtles.

Russ has been involved in the creation of many different funding mechanisms for biodiversity conservation and is a regular participant in conferences that involve subjects as diverse as climate change, biodiversity, protected areas, indigenous peoples, and of course, primates and turtles. Based on a bird-watching model that he learned from his son, John, Russ has even created the concept of Primate-Watching and Primate Life-Listing to stimulate global interest in these animals, and is trying to do the same for Turtle-Watching. He is happiest, though, when out exploring another rain forest or searching for a rare primate, turtle, some other flagship species on his bucket list, or adding yet another country to his Travelology List (currently at 169 countries). He has almost certainly been to more rain forests than anyone else, and has definitely seen the most wild primate species (~360 taxa). His turtle list, now over 90 species, is a work in progress. Along with increasing his physical experiences and sightings, Russ has placed great importance on publishing, and has already published 40

books and over 750 popular and scientific articles. Russ is especially proud of his work in discovering and describing species new to science. He has been involved in the description of 21 new species (three turtles and 18 primates), has had eight named after him (two lemurs, one saki monkey, three frogs, a lizard, and an ant – but no turtles yet), and has collected several named by others.

His work has been recognized by many different organizations, universities, and countries. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and has two honorary doctorates, one from Stony Brook and one from Eckerd College. He was named a "Hero for the Planet" by Time magazine in 1998 (an honor shared by previous Behler Award winner Peter Pritchard), and has received nearly two dozen awards, including the Gold Medal of the San Diego Zoological Society (1987), the Order of the Golden Ark from Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands (1995), the National Order of the Southern Cross from the President of Brazil (1997), the Grand Sash and Order of the Yellow Star (1998) from the President of Suriname, the Sir Peter Scott Award for Conservation Merit from the SSC (2006), and the Harvard University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Centennial Medal (2017). In September 2018 he received the very prestigious and high-profile Indianapolis Prize, effectively the "Nobel Prize for Conservation", for his accomplishments and leadership in global conservation efforts.

Aside from all his contributions to conservation, Russ considers his greatest accomplishment the fact that his children are all committed to biodiversity conservation, including his sons John, a world-class bird expert, and Mick, mainly focused on plant conservation, and his daughter Juliana, who is considering becoming a primatologist. Russ has been a most valued and trusted friend, mentor, facilitator, and partnership builder, as well an inspirational rock star in the global conservation universe for many in the turtle conservation and research communities.