

Shai Singh, 2021 Behler Turtle Conservation Award Honoree

Saurabh Dewan, Brian Horne, Rick Hudson, and Andrew Walde

This year's prestigious 16th Annual Behler Turtle Conservation Award honors Dr. Shailendra Singh (Shai) of India. This award, considered the "Nobel Prize" of turtle conservation and biology, honors and celebrates extraordinary dedication and influential leadership in the international chelonian community.

Shai hails from a small village on Jarwal Road near the Katarniaghat Wildlife Sanctuary, along the Indo-Nepal border in Uttar Pradesh, India. As a child, he became interested in Indian Tent turtles that established his deep personal connection to turtles. Shai's passion at times drew his grandmother's wrath, notably when he cut up her brand new mosquito net to make a turtle trap!

Today he leads the charge to conserve India's diverse turtle fauna, many of which are some of the world's most threatened species. Shai earned a Masters in Environmental Science evaluating the headstarting program of Gharial at the Kukrail Gharial Rehabilitation Centre and his Ph.D. on the nesting ecology of *Batagur* turtles.

His decision to pursue a career in wildlife conservation met with opposition from his parents as he turned down an officer's appointment with the Indian Border Security Force. On the encouragement of the distinguished naturalist Dhruvjyoti Basu and with support from Turtle Survival Alliance, Shai began working as a researcher with the Centre For Herpetology/Madras Crocodile Bank Trust. While there, Shai established the Chambal turtle conservation program, targeting the Critically Endangered Red-crowned Roof Turtle, *B. kachuga*. His fieldwork was under the supervision of Brian Horne, then at San Diego Zoo's Institute for Conservation Research; other academic supervisors included Rana Pratap Singh and Ram Lakhan Singh.

This project has become an ongoing flagship program for turtle conservation in northern India and has protected over 10,000 turtle nests and released over 150,000 hatchlings of both *B. kachuga* and *B. dhongoka*. The program is closely integrated with riverine communities and has an education center in Garhaita, a remote village along the Chambal River. The center provides outreach activities and alternative livelihood training to the impoverished communities that depend on the Chambal River for subsistence. In recognition of this work, Disney Worldwide Conservation Fund selected Shai as one of their Conservation Heroes for 2008, the first Indian to receive this prestigious award.

Shai had his first opportunity to visit the USA in 2007 to present his work on the Chambal River at the TSA/TFTSG symposium in Atlanta. There he had the opportunity to interact with turtle stalwarts such as Peter Pritchard, Rick Hudson, Anders Rhodin, and others. Shai notes that attending this conference was the turning point of his career, and the following year he was hired as Director of the TSA India Program.

Though very young at the time, hiring Shai to lead TSA India was an easy decision, as it became apparent that he seemed to instinctively understand TSA's approach to turtle conservation and was able to conceptualize what needed to be done to protect and recover species. Since then he has sustained TSA's longest-standing program—and one of its most comprehensive—through his sheer force of will and a tireless commitment to writing grants. Though his program has enjoyed steady support from the Disney Conservation Fund, it has survived largely on small grants, notably from the Turtle Conservation Fund and the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund.

Shai was instrumental in organizing three Indian freshwater turtle and tortoise strategic planning workshops from 2005 to 2017, attended by top chelonian research and conservation experts worldwide. These workshops identified priority threatened species, areas, and partners, updated IUCN Red List assessments, and set in motion long-term research and recovery programs.

These programs implemented nest protection, rear-and-release, survival and dispersal studies, conservation breeding, and capacity-building programs targeting each region's flagship turtle species. Notably, Shai supervised Sunderban Tiger Reserve in establishing India's only conservation breeding program for one of the world's most endangered species, the Northern River Terrapin, *B. baska*. This program started with just 11 individuals, and today the population is 380 turtles. He also helped establish assurance colonies jointly with Uttar Pradesh Forest Department at the Kukrail center for 10 of the 15 threatened North Indian turtle species and has assisted with the rescue, repatriation, and rehabilitation of over 25,000 turtles of 16 species in the last decade.

In 2015, in a first of its kind event in India, Shai facilitated airlifting 400 rescued turtles from Mumbai across the country to the Kukrail Center for veterinary treatment and eventual repatriation. He also repatriated 130 Critically Endangered Malagasy tortoises to Madagascar and has also established rescue programs for freshwater dolphins and gharials.

Shai's outgoing and infectious personality has allowed him to build solid and long-lasting relationships with many riparian communities. These bonds have resulted in establishing three community conservation centers along the Chambal, Ghaghra, and Brahmaputra rivers. By creating opportunities for socio-economic reforms and alternative livelihoods in these underdeveloped regions, Shai's efforts have successfully established a connection between local people and their aquatic wildlife. Additionally, he has been actively involved in building capacity among various stakeholders, conducting many training workshops on rescue management, turtle and crocodile husbandry, enforcement, and ecotourism.

In recognition of his leadership in conserving turtles of the Indian sub-continent, Shai was appointed as a Regional Vice-Chair for South Asia for the IUCN Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group. On World Turtle Day 2016, he helped TSA sign a long-term agreement with the government of Uttar Pradesh for cooperation on turtle conservation. Other such cooperatives have included the governments of Nagaland,

Assam, and West Bengal, and several NGOs, such as Wildlife Conservation Society-India.

Shai's commitment to conservation is unwavering and his enduring passion serves as an inspiration to the global turtle conservation community to share his dream of preserving India's magnificent chelonian fauna for the future. The international turtle conservation community owes him a debt of gratitude for his efforts over the years.