



High Honors

Shailendra Singh, 2021 Behler Turtle Conservation Award honoree

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

This year's prestigious 16th Annual Behler Turtle Conservation Award honors Dr. Shailendra (Shai) Singh 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 near the Katarniaghat Wildlife Sanctuary along the Indo-Nepal border in Uttar Pradesh, India. A childhood interest in Indian Tent Turtles (*Pangshura tecta*) established his deep personal con-

nection 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 among the world's most threatened species.

After earning a Master's in Environmental Science, Shai decided to pursue a career in wildlife conservation (and turn down an officer's appointment with the Indian Border Security Force), a decision met with opposition from his parents. But with the encouragement of distinguished naturalist Dhruvjyoti Basu and support from TSA, he began working as a researcher with The Madras Crocodile Bank Trust and Centre for Herpetology. While there, Shai established the Chambal River turtle conservation program, targeting the critically endangered Red-crowned Roofed Turtle (*Batagur kachuga*). Building upon this work, Shai pursued a Ph.D. examining the nesting ecology of the Chambal's *Batagur* turtles under the supervision

Arunima Singh

of Brian Horne, with other academic support from Rana Pratap Singh and Ram Lakhan Singh.

The Chambal *Batagur* project has become a flagship program in northern India, protecting over 10,000 turtle nests and releasing more than 120,000 Red-crowned and Three-striped (*B. dhongoka*) roofed turtles. The program is closely integrated with riverine communities and has an education center in Garhaita, a remote village along the Chambal. Recognizing this work, in 2008 Disney Conservation Fund selected Shai as a Conservation Hero, the first Indian to receive this prestigious award.

Shai first visited the USA in 2007 to present his work on the Chambal River at the TSA/TFTSG annual Symposium in Atlanta. There, he was able to interact with turtle conservation stalwarts, such as Peter Pritchard, Rick Hudson, and Anders Rhodin, among others. Attending this conference was a turning point of Shai's career. The following year TSA hired him as Director of the TSA India Program.

"Though young at the time, hiring Shai to lead TSA India was an easy decision," TSA President Rick Hudson said, "as it became apparent that he instinctively understood TSA's approach to turtle conservation and was able to conceptualize what needed to be done to protect and recover species." Shai has since sustained TSA's longest-standing and most comprehensive program through sheer tenacity and a tireless commitment to fundraising.

Shai was instrumental in organizing three strategic planning workshops in India from 2005 to 2017, which set in motion long-term research and recovery programs targeting each region's flagship turtle species. Shai also supervised Sundarban Tiger Reserve in establishing India's only conservation breeding program for one of the world's most endangered species, the Northern River Terrapin (*Batagur baska*). This program began with just 11 turtles, and today it numbers 380.

Shai helped establish successful joint assurance colonies with Uttar Pradesh Forest Department at the Kukrail Gharial Research Centre for 10 of the 15 threatened North Indian turtle species. There, he has assisted with the rescue, repatriation, and rehabilitation of over 35,000 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 Centre for veterinary treatment and eventual repatriation. He also repatriated 130 Critically Endangered Malagasy tortoises to Madagascar, and established rescue programs for freshwater dolphins and gharials.

Shai's outgoing and infectious personality allowed him to build long-lasting relationships with many riverside communities. These bonds have resulted in establishing three community

Pradeep Ray

From left to right: Dr. Shailendra Singh (Shai) began his turtle conservation career with a focus on restoring the Red-crowned Roofed Turtle (pictured here with a female) in the Chambal River. Today, this program has released thousands of hatchlings into the river; Shai credits much of his success to the dedicated individuals of the TSA India Program team.

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. 🐢

