

Gerald Kuchling Receives the 2009 Behler Turtle Conservation Award



Rick Hudson and Heather Lowe

The Turtle Survival Alliance and the IUCN/SSC Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group are pleased to announce that the 2009 Behler Award is presented to Dr. Gerald Kuchling. It would be altogether inappropriate to have a meaningful discussion about chelonian conservation programs without prominently mentioning Gerald. His name has more or less become synonymous with turtle conservation and he will forever be linked with the recovery of some of the world's rarest and most endangered chelonians. Approaching problems with a strong background in science, combined with a healthy dose of common sense, Gerald's perspective on dealing with turtle conservation issues is always analytical and well reasoned. He is unusual in that he manages to blend strong academic credentials with a genuine appreciation of husbandry techniques, and the result is a very practical application of science to conservation problems, especially those with a captive component. According to TSA President Rick Hudson "If you have to go to battle to save a turtle on the brink of extinction, you definitely want Gerald Kuchling on your side."

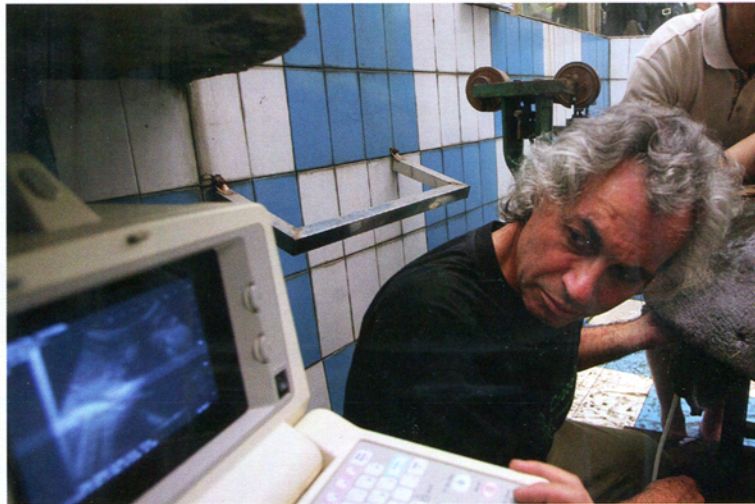
He is best known for leading the recovery effort for one of the world's most endangered species – the western swamp turtle (*Pseudemys umbrina*). Moving from their native Austria to Western Australia in 1987, Gerald and his wife Guundie have dedicated their lives to this species, once believed to be extinct. Dr. Kuchling launched a recovery program in 1988 that originated with a captive colony of just 25 animals. A reintroduction component was added in 1994 that has boosted the wild population

from less than 50 animals to more than 300. Dr. Kuchling and his wife also co-authored two children's books featuring the western swamp turtle, with the hopes of inspiring future generations to continue to care for this imperiled species.

In Madagascar, he brought the critical situation of the Madagascan big-headed turtle (*Erymnochelys madagascariensis*) to our

freshwater turtle trade between Myanmar and China. He has worked on Roti Island snakes (*Chelodina mccordi*) in Indonesia, giant softshell turtles (*Chitra chitra*) in Thailand, tortoises in South Africa, river terrapins (*Batagur affinis*) in Malaysia, Desert tortoises in California, and most recently he led the effort to rescue the Yangtze giant softshell turtle (*Rafetus swinhoei*) in China from extinction. As this announcement is

being written, eggs from the last pair of *Rafetus* in China are incubating at Suzhou Zoo. Looking down the road, it would be altogether fitting if Gerald's receiving this award coincided with the successful hatching of these eggs. In what would be perhaps the most significant event in the history of turtle conservation, hatching *Rafetus* would be the crown jewel in a remarkable set of achievements that have marked Dr. Kuchling's career.



Dr. Kuchling performs an ultrasound exam on the female *Rafetus* to determine reproductive status. Photo by Qi Zhenglin

attention in the early 1990's. He also worked on the ploughshare tortoise (*Astrochelys yniphora*), studying their reproductive cycle. He is widely regarded as the world's foremost authority on chelonian reproductive physiology and pioneered the use of endoscopy for sex determination in turtles. In 1999, he published the definitive book on this topic, *The Reproductive Biology of the Chelonia*.

In Burma, he is credited with the rediscovery of one of the world's rarest and most endangered freshwater turtles, the Burmese roofed turtle (*Batagur trivittata*), establishing the first captive breeding group for this species. His 1990's market surveys in Yunnan Province provided much insight into the extent of the

The Turtle Survival Alliance and the IUCN/SSC Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group (TFTSG) established the John Behler Turtle Conservation Award in 2006, a major annual award presented jointly by these groups to honor leadership and excellence in the field of turtle and tortoise conservation. The award honors the memory of John Behler, previous Chair of the TFTSG and Curator of Herpetology at the Bronx Zoo, Wildlife Conservation Society. The Award includes an honorarium of \$3,000, and co-sponsors this year include the Chelonian Research Foundation, Conservation International, Chelonian Research Institute, Behler Chelonian Center, World Chelonian Trust, Wildlife Conservation Society, Deborah Behler and Brett and Nancy Stearns.