

Eric V. Goode, 2016 Behler Turtle Conservation Award Recipient

MAX MAURER, ROSS KIESTER, AND PAUL GIBBONS

I was fortunate to grow up in rural northern California, in the 1960's and 70's, where my family gave me an appreciation and love for the natural world. I spent my childhood exploring the family's 250-acre ranch, hiking in the hills, trout fishing in crystal clear streams, and searching for native wildlife. I had a particular fascination with reptiles and amphibians and kept a record of every species I encountered long before I knew about "Life Lists".

Pond turtles, Western newts, California King snakes, Red-sided Garter snakes, Pacific Giant salamanders, and Yellow- and Red-legged frogs were all common in our streams and ponds. California was a paradise in those halcyon days and little did I know that so many of the common species of my childhood would soon be rare or entirely gone in just a few decades. Looking back, I realize how all these creatures were taken for granted.

Today, when I return to my family ranch, there are no Yellow- and Red-legged frogs, no newts, Pond turtles, or King snakes, and the most common species of all, the beautiful California Red-sided Garter snake, has disappeared completely. Sadly, what happened in Sonoma is a microcosm of what has happened to species around the globe.

On my sixth birthday, I received a Mediterranean tortoise named Ajax. My love affair with Ajax led to a postage stamp collection of turtles and tortoises that I kept in my bedroom until college: Indian Star tortoises, Red-footed tortoises, Burmese Black Mountain tortoises, Leopard tortoises, Texas tortoises, North American Wood turtles, Box turtles, Spotted turtles, Amazon Yellow-spotted Side-neck turtles, Indian Spotted turtles, along with an assortment of snakes and a 3-foot long Argentinian tegu that shared my bed. I grew up in the era that predated CITES and the Endangered Species Act. Anything and everything exotic was readily available in the pet trade.

By the mid 1990s, I realized that the toll placed on wildlife, both from over collecting for the pet trade and from other anthropogenic pressures, was not sustainable. The turtles and tortoises native to my home state of California, and globally, were disappearing at an alarming rate. By this time I had become acutely aware of the plight of the world's wildlife and started to think about my role in conservation, particularly the dire need to protect turtles and tortoises, as they were fast becoming one of the most endangered groups of animals on the planet. This passion for turtles and tortoises has been a constant thread throughout my life and remains with me to this day.

As luck would have it, in January of 2003 I received a phone call from John Behler that would change my life forever, and answer the calling in me to make a difference.

— Eric Goode, founder and President of the Turtle Conservancy in his Behler Award acceptance speech at the TSA Conference in New Orleans, August 2016.

In 2002, after Eric Goode completed a Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) Burmese Star tortoise expedition to Myanmar, John Behler approached him with a proposal. He asked Goode to continue the WCS's tortoise breeding programs then happening at the St. Catherine's Island (SCI) Species Survival Center, off the coast of Georgia.

John, with his more than 30 years of *ex situ* experience working with these rare species, wanted

to make sure the assurance colonies he had maintained — including Radiated, Burmese Star, Spider, Flat-tailed, Egyptian, and Burmese Black Mountain tortoises — would remain intact after the closing of SCI, and he wanted to especially ensure that the breeding program would go forward in perpetuity.

TAKING THE HELM

After a visit by Behler, Bill Holmstrom, and



Eric with the recently named Goode's Thornscrub Tortoise (*Gopherus evgoodei*) during a biodiversity inventory of the preserve that was created to protect the species and its tropical deciduous forest habitat near the town of Alamos in Sonora, Mexico. PHOTO CREDIT: JAMES LIU

Maurice Rodrigues to Eric's small vacation property in southern California, they all agreed to set up a new facility for the tortoises. Construction was begun in 2004 on a series of buildings and greenhouses comprising the heart of the Turtle Conservancy's conservation center.

Over \$1 million dollars funded state of the art greenhouses, tortoise houses, a nursery, quarantine area, commissary, and numerous outdoor enclosures and ponds for the new turtle and tortoise breeding center. In 2006, after John's passing, the center was named the Behler Chelonian Center to honor his life of service to turtle and tortoise conservation.

Today, the Turtle Conservancy's Behler Chelonian Center (TC) is known as one of the world's premiere facilities for breeding endangered turtles and tortoises. The center is a 501(c)(3) public charity, and since 2006, the only AZA-certified facility solely dedicated to breeding imperiled chelonians. The TC is home to 35 species of turtles and tortoises, including 15 of the IUCN TFTSGs "Top 40 Most Endangered".

The TC has bred some of the World's most challenging species, and some never before bred in captivity, including: the Assam Roofed turtle (*Pangshura sylhetensis*), Impressed tortoise

(*Manouria impressa*), Speckled Padloper (*Homo-*
pus signatus), Arakan Forest turtle (*Heosemys*
depressa), and Okinawa Leaf turtle (*Geoemyda*
japonica), to name a few. The center has also bred
2nd and 3rd generations of many at risk species.

In January 2012, the TC became the first to
repatriate internationally bred, threatened tur-
tles for conservation when we returned Golden
Coin turtles (*Cuora trifasciata*) to Hong Kong for
an ongoing reintroduction program. Over the
past decade, the TC has bred many turtles and
tortoises for conservation, hatching 25 species
totaling 1,400 offspring surviving.

Over these same ten years, the TC supported
and collaborated with researchers, ecologists,
conservationists, naturalists, students, and art-
ists. Many of the world's leading authorities on
turtles and tortoises have spent time on the Ojai,
California campus, researching reproductive
biology, physiology, genetics, and the natural his-
tory of the many species in the collection.

Eric currently sits on the boards of: Chelo-
nian Research Institute, the Turtle Conservation
Fund, Rainforest Trust, and Global Wildlife Con-
servation. He is a member of the IUCN Tortoise
and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group.

THE ECCENTRIC CONSERVATIONIST

Goode experienced an unorthodox career
path for a naturalist and conservationist. He's
evolved from a turtle keeper, to an innkeeper, to
an Earth keeper.

His unique connections to both the entertain-
ment and hospitality industries allowed him to
leverage a very visible conservation platform, and
to raise public awareness of chelonian challenges
by being profiled on *CBS' 60 Minutes* and *Charlie*
Rose, and in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*,
Wall Street Journal, and with other media outlets.

To bring awareness of the plight of turtles to
tens of millions of people, he created the Turtle
Ball, one of New York's more exclusive and idiosyn-
cratic benefits that regularly brings together artists,
celebrities, philanthropists, conservationists, and
the fashion world for a festive evening that focuses
a spotlight on the global turtle extinction crisis.

Eric is the publisher and co-editor of *The*
Tortoise magazine, a periodical of the Turtle
Conservancy that merges science, travel, culture,
art, and conservation.

Through the Turtle Conservancy, Eric's work
extends to the far corners of the globe, including
Argentina, China, Indonesia, Madagascar, Myan-

mar, Taiwan, Thailand, Namibia, the Philippines,
South Africa, and Mexico. The organization's
proudest achievement, to date, is the 45,000
acres protected over just the past 18 months.

HABITAT CONSERVATION MILESTONES

Eric's land conservation efforts began a
number of years ago with a conservation ease-
ment to create a 250-acre nature preserve on the
family ranch where he grew up. With the Turtle
Conservancy, he's helped create the 1,000-acre
Geometric Tortoise Preserve in South Africa.
Quite possibly, this enclave is where this Criti-
cally Endangered tortoise will make its last stand
against extinction and where it will begin to
make its march back from the brink.

Later, Eric secured a major grant from the Leon-
ardo DiCaprio Foundation to catalyze purchase of
43,540 acres in the heart of the Bolson tortoise range
in north central Mexico — now the only completely
protected area dedicated to this imperiled species.

Shortly after that, Goode's Thornscrub tor-
toise (*Gopherus evgoodei*) was named in honor of
Eric's longstanding turtle and tortoise conserva-
tion work. He teamed up with scientific authors
who described the species in order to raise funds
and purchase 1,000 acres of its tropical, decidu-
ous forest habitat in Sonora, Mexico.



Eric Goode and Miye McCullough with a Bolson Tortoise (*Gopherus flavomarginata*) found on the Turtle Conservancy's
43,540-acre tortoise preserve in the heart of the Bolsón de Mapimí in Durango, Mexico. PHOTO CREDIT: MAURICE RODRIGUES

More than any other recognition I have received, the Behler Turtle Conservation Award means the most to me. I am deeply honored to be recognized by my peers in the turtle conservation world, and I share this award with the Turtle Conservancy Family because I could not have done what we have collectively achieved without you: Ursula Britton, Rebecca Chaiklin, Andrea Currylow, Taylor Edwards, Walton Ford, Matt Frankel, Gregory George, Paul Gibbons, Alfonso Gonzalez, Nicholas Goode, Juan Hernandez, Margaretha Hofmeyr, Angel Jimenez, Armando Jimenez, Rene Jimenez, Jim Juvik, Ross Kiester, Gerald Kuchling, Christine Light, James Liu, Max Maurer, Miye McCullough, John Mitchell, Russell Mittermeier, Lukasz Pogorzelski, Rosalinda Palomo Ramos, Samuel Ramirez, Anders Rhodin, Rick Ridgeway, Lynn Rimkus, Maurice Rodrigues, Andrew Sabin, Julian Sands, Chris Shepherd, Craig Stanford, Fisher Stevens, Peter Paul vanDijk, Mercy Vaughn and Michael Zilkha; and our major funding partners who make it all possible, Andrew Sabin, Matthew Frankel, Global Wildlife Conservation, Leonardo DiCaprio, Rainforest Trust, Stuart Salenger, Weeden Foundation, and Michael Zilkha.