



Kalyar Platt holds an exceptionally large Burmese Star Tortoise at the Lawkananda Wildlife Sanctuary in Bagan. PHOTO CREDIT: ME ME SOE

Kalyar Platt – Saving Imperiled Turtles in Myanmar

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I well remember the first time I met Kalyar. It was January 1999, and I was with John Thorbjarnarson on my maiden trip to Myanmar, surveying crocodiles in the Ayeyarwady Delta. It was a beautiful day – dry, sunny, and surprisingly cool for Myanmar – when Kalyar, along with professor U Win Maung from Yangon University, arrived by boat at our island camp to spend a few days gaining research experience. Unbeknownst to either of us at the time, this chance

meeting would irrevocably alter the course of our lives. Over the next three years we worked together in Wildlife Conservation Society’s (WCS) Myanmar Program. With John Behler, we searched for Burmese Star Tortoises at Shwe Settaw Wildlife Sanctuary, advised on a nascent captive-breeding program, and then watched helplessly as poachers stripped the sanctuary of its tortoises. That this disheartening experience brought us closer together was but small consolation

for the frustration we felt at being unable to alter the course of events. In early 2000, we trekked through the western mountains to study Arakan Forest Turtles. Later that same year, we learned of large turtles that laid eggs the “size of duck eggs”, information that ultimately led to the “rediscovery” of Burmese Roofed Turtles in the Dokthawady River and set in motion a train of events culminating in today’s successful conservation program for this critically endangered

species. Somewhere along the way we decided to get married, and in 2004 I was betrothed to this amazing woman who Rick Hudson has called a “Force of Nature”.

Kalyar was born in 1972 to Daw San San and U Nyunt Thein in what was then Rangoon, Burma. As a young girl, Kalyar often accompanied her father, a government engineer engaged in building hydropower dams to his work sites, and her earliest memories of turtles are of those collected by construction workers being thrown into large pits, destined to be eaten. Fascinated by the variety of species to be seen, she later recoiled in horror as her new friends were hauled from the pit and butchered alive by the camp cook. Kalyar muses that perhaps it was this early exposure to needless cruelty, which she was unable to reconcile with Buddhist teachings regarding the sanctity of life, that steered her into a life of conservation.

Kalyar grew up in Yangon and attended Yangon University where she earned a BSc. with Honors in 1995, and her MSc. in 2000. Knowing the universities in Myanmar were apt to be closed at any moment by the ruling military junta, and hoping to pursue intellectual opportunities abroad, Kalyar moved to Bangkok in 2001 and began working for WCS-Thailand. Shortly thereafter she was admitted into the graduate program at Chulalongkorn University where in 2007, she earned a Ph.D. studying the ecology of *Batagur affinis* under the noted Thai biologist, Dr. Kumthorn Thirakhupt. Degree in hand, she moved to the United States where in the meantime I had taken an academic position at Sul Ross State University in the tiny hamlet of Alpine, Texas. Employment opportunities in Alpine being almost non-existent, Kalyar moved to New York to live with her sisters, taking a lucrative job at an orchid farm that catered to the rich and famous, and we spent the next four years shuttling back-and-forth on academic holidays. But something was missing. Although our jobs were satisfying and financially rewarding, our passions lay elsewhere - we dreamed of one day returning to Myanmar and devoting our energies to turtle conservation. In 2010, Rick Hudson and Colin Poole made that dream a reality. The TSA hired Kalyar as Director of the TSA Myanmar Program and a few months later I came aboard as the WCS Herpetologist for Southeast Asia.

Kalyar’s accomplishments over the past four years bespeak of her abilities. She is one of those rare individuals who can not only hob knob with wealthy donors and government officials, but also do effective boots-on-the-ground turtle



The Burmese Star Tortoise is one of two endemic chelonian species that are making strong recoveries under Kalyar’s leadership. PHOTO CREDIT: ME ME SOE

conservation. Her first achievement was reenergizing the moribund Burmese Star Tortoise conservation program. To this end, Kalyar organized a national conservation workshop, and together with the participants developed an action plan outlining how and where to restore this iconic species. Not content to merely develop the plan, she next set out to execute it. The upshot is that almost 250 headstarted Star Tortoises now roam freely at Minzontaung Wildlife Sanctuary, with more soon to follow. Building on success, Kalyar has put in motion a second reintroduction in Shwe Settaw Wildlife Sanctuary, a large protected area that could ultimately be home to thousands of tortoises. Kalyar has also worked tirelessly to pull the Burmese Roofed Turtle

back from the edge by overseeing the collection of eggs from the Chindwin River, conducting the first release of headstarted turtles (2015), establishing a third assurance colony, and boosting production of hatchlings at the Mandalay Zoo. Kalyar’s achievements have not gone unnoticed in Myanmar where turtles are now at the forefront of the budding conservation movement. Indeed, in a recent Facebook post, the Assistant Director General of the Myanmar Forest Department wrote that TSA/WCS efforts on behalf of turtles is without exception the most effective conservation program in the country, and much of this success was due to the unceasing labors of one person, the *Leik Saya Magyi*, Indomitable Turtle Lady, of Myanmar, Kalyar Platt.