



TURTLE SURVIVAL ALLIANCE

AN IUCN PARTNERSHIP NETWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE CAPTIVE MANAGEMENT OF FRESHWATER TURTLES AND TORTOISES

Monday, September 29, 2008

TSA Conference in Tucson a Huge Success

Joint Annual Meeting of the TSA and TFTSG
17 – 20 September 2008

Conference Highlights

Despite a shaky start due to hotel construction, the 6th Annual Symposium on Conservation and Biology of Freshwater Turtles and Tortoises finished strong and, judging by the positive feedback we are receiving, was a rousing success. We had 180 registered attendees, sufficient to put us at break even financially heading into the fund-raising auction. The conference kicked off Wednesday evening with our ice breaker, with special guest John Cann speaking on the turtles of New Guinea. The official program got underway Thursday AM with Rick Hudson introducing Scott Davis as the first Executive Director of TSA. Scott will be responsible for overseeing a structural reorganization of the TSA and positioning us to become more efficient at fund raising thereby allowing the hiring of paid staff. It is obvious that we have come as far as we can as a volunteer organization and if we are to effectively address the global turtle crisis, we must elevate our position among the international conservation donor community.

Lu Shunqing (WCS China) opened the first session with a presentation of the History of the *Rafetus swinhoei* rescue operation in China. Despite everything going right in the beginning, the sad ending to this remarkable story is that none of the more than 100 eggs laid hatched, and all embryos died prematurely. This is due to the compromised nutritional status of the female that we are hopeful will be corrected in time for the next breeding attempt. The TSA is committed to a successful outcome and we are already planning next year's strategy. To commemorate this historic event we commissioned an original *Rafetus* painting by noted reptile artist Tell Hicks. The original was sold at live auction and prints were available for purchase throughout the conference. All proceeds go to support this effort and prints will be offered on the TSA website soon at (www.turtlesurvival.org).

Another conference highlight was the 2008 TSA magazine or annual report. At 64 pages, this can hardly be described as a newsletter any longer. Copies will soon be mailed to all TSA members but you can download it today from the TSA web site home page. It's our best report ever and reflects the expanding complexity of the TSA and our growing range of both domestic and global programs.

The Program

Attendees heard 62 presentations featuring a truly international lineup with speakers from 13 countries including Australia, China, India, Columbia, Canada, Malaysia, Brazil, Chile and Myanmar; TSA Europe was well represented with guests and speakers from Austria, Italy and the Netherlands. For the first time we held concurrent sessions to accommodate the large number of presentations, and to allow a more relaxed atmosphere with more time for lunch and socializing.

Sessions included TCF Sponsored Programs, Field Conservation, Turtles of the Southwest, Ecology, Captive Husbandry, Veterinary and Desert Tortoises. Prior to the Desert Tortoise session the USFWS Recovery Plan for the restoration of this species was presented, followed by Ray Ashton's panel discussion on tortoise relocation techniques using the Gopher tortoise as a model.

Two husbandry workshops were conducted, both well attended. Brian Horne held an egg incubation workshop that was very interactive and provided opportunities for back and forth discussions. Dave Manser conducted a filtration workshop that demonstrated the principles and techniques behind a functional system. Due to the overwhelming popularity of these workshops, we plan to hold more of these at next year's conference.

Program Chairman Don Boyer and his assistant Kim Lovich are to be commended for pulling together a complicated program; and special thanks to Chuck Schaffer for getting the program into publication format. For a complete listing of abstracts and posters, the entire program will be posted on the TSA web site by late next week.

The Auction

Both the silent and live auctions were held Friday, the later at the Tucson Botanic Garden following a catered Mexican buffet dinner. Peter Praschag gave a fascinating presentation on The arduous quest for the river terrapin Batagur baska: Distress call for an almost unknown turtle on the edge of extinction that featured many interesting images of his travels in India and Bangladesh with emphasis on the Sundarban Batagur.



Auctioneer Dick Vogt and Sheena Koeth entertain the crowd



John Cann helps drum up interest in his unique auction items from Australia.

We were joined by celebrity wildlife film maker Nigel Marvin for the live auction who certainly livened up the crowd with his jokes, which of course he auctioned off. Dick Vogt was back for a repeat performance as auctioneer, ably assisted by a spirited and good natured Sheena Koeth who weathered Dick's verbal assault with charm and poise. Together this team kept the group engaged and spending money. The highlight of the evening was the original Rafetus artwork that sold for \$5,500 to Frank and Kate Slavens. However the Slavens generously wrote the check for \$10,000, providing a much needed boost to the depleted Rafetus account!! The final tally for the combined silent and live auction was just over \$21,000. The TSA wishes to thank all who donated auction items this year and especially those who came and bid. This is our most important annual fund-raising event and were it not for the live auction, we would not be able to wrap up this conference in the black.



Nigel Marvin (center) with Kate and Frank Slavens who outbid their competitors for the original Rafetus artwork



Conference Program Lonnie McCaskill and new TSA Executive Director Scott Davis (right) enjoy the Botanic Garden social and dinner.

The Awards Banquet

Breaking early on Saturday, conference participants traveled to the Arizona – Sonora Desert Museum for a cocktail reception, movie and final banquet. Situated in the heart of the desert and surrounded by giant Saguaro cactus, this location provided a perfect backdrop for a wonderful evening. A brief rain shower brought both the desert and the crowd to life, and people had to be prodded inside to view the newest movie production by Eric Goode and Maurice Rodriguez of the Behler Chelonian Center. Centered around the January 2008 workshop in Madagascar, this film eloquently describes the diversity of the endemic chelonian fauna of Madagascar as well as the increasing threats that they face, especially the angonoka or ploughshare tortoise. Following the film guests were served a gourmet southwestern dinner, followed by the annual awards ceremony. Several notable awards were presented:

- Brian Horne and Lonnie McCaskill presented the 2008 Disney Conservation Hero award to Shailendra Singh who coordinates the TSA Turtle Conservation Program in India. This award carried a \$1,000 stipend;
- Rick Hudson presented Gerald Kuchling and Lu Shunqing each with a mounted canvass print of Rafetus,

in appreciation for their extraordinary efforts to bring the last captive pair in China together for attempted breeding;

- Rick also presented Pat and Alan Koval of Toronto Canada with a mounted canvass print of Burmese star tortoises, in recognition of their generous \$40,000 donation. Their funds will allow the TSA to address critical conservation initiatives in Myanmar, China (Rafetus) and India (Sundarbans Batagur);
- Anders Rhodin presented the annual student speaker award to Mario Vargas-Ramirez for his excellent presentation on *Podocnemis lewyana*, a turtle endemic to his native Columbia. Mario traveled to Tucson from Germany where he is a student at Dresden;
- The highlight of the Awards Banquet is always the presentation of the Behler Chelonian Conservation Award named for the late John Behler who passed away in 2006. This year's recipient was Dr. Peter Pritchard who received the award in absentia. Tragically Peter was unable to attend due to the untimely death of his son Dominic just a few days prior. He did manage to send a three page letter expressing his feelings that was read by Anders.



Rick Hudson presents Pat and Alan Koval with a canvas Burmese star tortoise print in appreciation of their generous donation to the TSA.



Brian Horne and Lonnie McCaskill present Shaileendra Singh with one of the 2008 Disney Conservation Hero Awards, complete with Mickey ears and \$1,000 check



Rick Hudson presents Gerald Kuchling and Lu Shunqing with a canvass Rafetus print in recognition of their efforts to save Rafetus.



Anders Rhodin presents Marion Vargas-Ramirez with the annual student speaker award for his presentation on *Podocnemis lewyana*.

Special thanks to our sponsors and to all who worked hard to make this conference a success.

Conference Chairman Lonnie McCaskill again did an exceptional job of organizing the conference and keeping things on track, ably assisted by the Disney team that pitches in every year to make sure that we are successful: Andy Daneault, Rose Tremblay and Nancy Reinert. Rose and Nancy manned the merchandise booth and oversaw the silent auction that together took in \$5,780. Robert Via and colleagues from the Tucson Herp Society gave generously of their time and ran AV during the entire three days. TSA Membership Coordinator Heather Lowe handled registration and on line credit card sales with the friendly and professional efficiency that we have come to expect over the years.

The conference would not be possible were it not for the generosity of our many sponsors. For contributions that help offset speaker travel costs and student speaker awards, we are grateful to Sheena Koeth, Conservation International, Brett and Nancy Stearns, Chelonian Research Foundation, and Zoo Atlanta. As they have in the past, Reptiles Magazine again helped to sponsor our opening icebreaker. And, in what has become an annual tradition, we owe an exceptional debt of gratitude to the BBQ Boys – Greg and Lisette George, Dave Manser (Ponds and Plants) and Jay Allen (Aquarium Innovations) – for a substantial donation to help offset catering costs at our Friday and Saturday night events. Finally, we are most grateful for the financial support of our title sponsor, ZooMed, Inc whose support is crucial to our conference. We urge you to support them by buying their products.

Next Year's Symposium

Start making plans now for next year's meeting when we return to St Louis in August 2009. Our host will be the St Louis Zoo and we will be announcing the dates very soon.

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