



Dick examines a Red-headed Amazon River turtle (*Podocnemis erythrocephala*) aboard his research vessel, Enigma. PHOTO CREDIT: ANDREW WALDE

Richard (Dick) C. Vogt Receives 9th Annual Behler Conservation Award

BRIAN D. HORNE AND ANDREW WALDE

Not many scientists can say that they have altered the course of an entire field of study; Dick Vogt can, not once, but now twice! His pioneering work with Jim Bull in the late 1970's on temperature-dependent sex determination (published in the journal *Science*) forever changed how we view the evolution and conservation of chelonians. Astoundingly, he has followed up this incredible career-defining achievement with yet another—his most recent work on chelonian

vocalization has again turned the turtle world upside down and is setting a new path for how we practice turtle conservation.

Dick and his students have not only shown that a number of turtle species are “talking”, but that there is communication between adult females and hatchlings in the Giant Amazonian River Turtle (*Podocnemis expansa*). This is the first documented evidence of post-hatching parental care in chelonians. Our conservation

community must now consider how these findings may affect how we headstarted this and other species. We must ask ourselves if we are disrupting important transference of learned behaviors from mother to offspring by keeping hatchlings in captivity for weeks to years before their release. We may unwittingly be doing more harm than good, much like how many early turtle conservationists incubated turtle eggs at cool temperatures, thereby producing only

males, before Dick's seminal work demonstrated the error of their ways. This sentiment is echoed by Peter Paul van Dijk: "Dick's fundamental role in the discovery of vocal communication between hatchlings and adult *Podocnemis* river turtles, will lead to another fundamental change in how *Podocnemis* population recovery efforts will be conducted, and will likely be relevant to other species efforts as well."

These two monumental scientific achievements should not overshadow the fact that Dick has published more than 100 scientific papers and book chapters, as well as 12 books in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. Rick Hudson states: "From a practical application standpoint, Dick's work impacts us every day and his influence on turtle conservation biology is profound." Gerald Kuchling further supports this: "Dick understands how to do cutting edge research and demonstrate its relevance for turtle conservation."

Dick earned his BS in 1971, MS in 1974, and Ph.D. in Zoology in 1978 from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, before holding a postdoctoral position at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History from 1978 to 1980. From 1981 to 2000, he was Investigador Titular and Curator of the Herpetology Collection at Estacion de Biología Tropical Los Tuxtlas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico (UNAM), before moving to his present position at the Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas da Amazônia, in Manaus, Brazil, where he is Research Professor in the Department of Biodiversity and Curator of Herpetology.

Dick's passion for turtle conservation started at a young age and he was one of the first to bring attention to the plight of Wisconsin's turtles. His diligence helped place the Ornate Box Turtle, the Wood Turtle, and the Blanding's Turtle on the Wisconsin Endangered Species list. Dick is widely considered an authority on North American map turtles, genus *Graptemys*. For his doctoral work, he studied the ecology and systematics of the *Graptemys pseudogeographica* complex throughout their range, with his main study area in the Mississippi River of Wisconsin. Additionally, he and his long-term mentor, the late Jack McCoy, conducted some of the early definitive work on *Graptemys* in the southern U.S. Gulf Coast region.

Dick's twenty years of research on the turtles of Mexico is unsurpassed in breadth and scope. He has published widely on such topics as community ecology, feeding biology, and reproductive biology of Kinosternidae, Emydidae, Geoemydidae, and Dermatemydidae. His research on the Central American River Turtle (*Dermatemys mawii*) in Mexico led to the IUCN ranking them



Dick with a Giant Amazon River Turtle (*Podocnemis expansa*), the subject of some cutting-edge scientific investigations into landscape-scale movements, parental care, and recently involving chelonian vocalizations. PHOTO CREDIT: ELIS PERRONE

as Critically Endangered.

After nearly twenty years of living in Mexico—which culminated in his most recent book “Turtles of Mexico: Land and Freshwater Forms”, co-authored with the late John Legler, Dick yet again decided to challenge himself and begin anew.

He picked up his family and moved to Manaus, Brazil—yet another turtle biologist's paradise. He quickly developed a lab and a core group of students that over the years has always been devoted to both Dick and turtles. Dick does not just have students; he has co-researchers, who share in all aspects of the research and presentation of the results. Many of his publications had what most turtle biologists would think of as unattainable sample sizes; he routinely has published on studies that included groups of 3,000 to 4,000 turtles.

Vivian Páez states: "Richard Vogt has devoted his life to the study of all aspects of turtle biology, principally in the United States, Mexico, and Brazil. In addition to his impressive publication record, he also has offered field courses to help train the next generation of turtle biologists, and has helped many Latin American turtle biologists to begin their careers." We don't know where our understanding of Mexican and South American turtles would be without Dick's dedication to these regions.

Yet, Dick is showing no evidence of slowing down. He has decided to branch out yet again by taking the helm of finishing John Legler's long-awaited book, "Turtles of Australia". If anyone can tackle this task, it is Dick Vogt. He continues to push the envelope of how we do turtle conservation and hence is extraordinarily deserving of our community's most prestigious award.