

Herp Expert Louie Porras Interview

An interview with reptile expert Louie Porras.

Interview by Phillip Samuelson

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In Part Two of my interview with Louie Porras, we pick up where we left off last month and describe Louie's life after leaving Florida and his first reptile business, The Shed. This month, Louie shares his thoughts about moving West, the herpetocultural industry as a whole and his current projects with field research and magazine publishing. I hope you enjoyed meeting Louie through this interview and found his thoughts and recollections of the herpetological field interesting. The unique perspective of a veteran herper like Louie is something I believe we all can learn from. He is truly a friend to herpetology and reptile enthusiasts everywhere.

P: Louie, we concluded the first part of your interview after you sold your interest in The Shed to Joe Beraducci and you were about to move to Utah. Please tell us what happened next?

L: I took time off to relax and traveled to Costa Rica on two occasions. Both turned out to be fabulous trips.

P: Please tell me about those trips.

L: The first was in the company of Roger Conant and Gordon Schuett. Roger was finishing a lengthy monograph on the genus *Agkistrodon*, and he wanted to find the cantil in northwestern Costa Rica. We knew it was there, because over the years a handful of specimens had been brought to the Picado Institute for venom studies. But conditions in January were just too dry and we couldn't come up with a specimen. Still, the trip was highly entertaining and enjoyable.

Before turning in at night, Roger began telling us some hilarious herp stories that happened about a half a century earlier. And every morning we'd wake up to see Roger writing in his notebook. We didn't know it then, but Roger was jotting down each story just as he told it to us, and 'lo and behold, later that year these amusing "bedtime stories" were published by the Toledo Herpetological Society.

Since Roger was getting on in years-and you know what, Phil? That was 18 years ago and he's still writing today! We urged him to keep writing this information or else someday these interesting nuggets of history would be lost forever. We also asked him to tell us about famous herpetologists like Gloyd, Klauber, Schmidt, Pope, Ditmars and Kauffeld. We wanted to know more about what these people were like, and more about Roger himself. About what it took to write his famous field guide, which, of course, is the best selling book in herpetological history, and about his travels in Mexico with his late wife Isabelle. Roger must have been way ahead of us, because soon after our trip he began working on his memoirs. In 1997, his exhaustive autobiography entitled *A Field Guide to the Life and Times of Roger Conant* was published by Selva and sponsored by the Toledo Zoo. The book is a masterpiece filled with all kinds of historical information, including numerous vignettes about the lives of famous herpetologists and zoo people. Few herpers realize this, but this is our only historical source of 20th century U.S. herpetology.

Later in '82, this time during the rainy season, I returned to Costa Rica with John Rindfleish. On the very last day we finally found a cantil, and that snake became the holotype of *Agkistrodon bilineatus howardgloydi*, described by Roger in '84.

P: I agree that Roger is a remarkable man, and I feel fortunate to have met and corresponded with him a little myself. Now let's talk now about your relocation to the western United States from Florida. Please tell us about your move to Utah and your return to the animal business.

L: The move was uneventful, but it took time for my family to adjust to the changes. I landed a job at Hogle Zoo, where I quickly made friends, but because of my inexperience in dealing with cold weather I must have been a sight to behold! Not only was I naïve about wearing layers of clothing, but one icy day I started slipping and sliding down a hill on account of my slick Florida shoes, and several members of the zoo crew who were watching exploded in laughter (smiles)!

I worked at Hogle Zoo until March of '84. One of my duties was to give herp slide presentations to local schoolteachers. To this day I wonder if I didn't have a premonition, because, one morning I cut a presentation short, and minutes after evacuating the building the roof collapsed from the weight of the snow! It crushed everything inside and caused more than

a million dollars in damage! After that incident I decided it was time to move on, and the following month my wife and I opened Zooherp.

P: Compared with your former business, The Shed, what was Zooherp like?

L: Although Zooherp was a continuation of my career in the reptile business, it was actually very different from The Shed. It had to be, because without Beraducci, things could never be the same. On account of the cold weather and the extreme heat of summer, we had to frame our warehouse much differently. And also because of the weather, we had to use every window of opportunity to get shipments in and out, and during the fall we had to stock the building full of animals to sell them locally over the next few months. Since Salt Lake wasn't an import town, we didn't have the luxury of picking out animals from other dealers, and since it also wasn't a designated port we had to use other cities for our imports and exports.

During the early years we struggled to get things going, and if it wasn't for Glen Fick and John Crawley, who came in as partners, the business would have never survived. In time, however, the business became firmly established and we enjoyed several fruitful years. Glen and John remained for a while, but then moved on to very successful business careers. Years later, I teamed up with John once again, but this time in the publishing business.

P: Herpetoculture flourished during the 1980s. Did changes in the herpetocultural scene in any way affect your business?

L: They most certainly did! But before I get into the herpetocultural scene of the '80s, I'd first like to set the stage by telling you a little about the '70s.

In the early part of the decade, people were keeping animals simply for their enjoyment, but then came a period of awakening. People soon learned how to sex herps and induce breeding by manipulating light, temperature and humidity. As the decade wore on and there was more breeding success, with it came the realization that money could be made from breeding herps, and from that point on changes came fast and furious.

At Zooherp, we catered largely to the herpetocultural crowd. Breeders were some of our best customers, but we realized that it was only a matter of time before they would also become our competition. Because of our overhead, we also realized that there would come a time when we would no longer be able to compete.

Soon, weekend swap meets emerged and people started selling herps at meetings like the International Herpetological Symposium. As the whole herpetocultural scene developed, it was apparent that a changing of the guard was taking place. Where once the market was controlled by a handful of major dealers, breeders had been so successful that many had become major dealers themselves. With the coming of the first Orlando expo in 1990, it was apparent that the transformation to a breeder's market was complete.

P: How did Zooherp compensate for the market changes?

L: For years we had been dealing largely with captive-bred wildlife, so we shifted gears and began to import. Early in the '90s Kamuran Tepedelen came onboard as our international purchasing agent, and he traveled on our behalf to places like Tanzania, China, Malaysia and Indonesia. From Indonesia, we began importing several novelties, such as black blood pythons from Sumatra, Wagler's tree vipers from Borneo and Sulawesi, an earless monitor, and the very first Savu python. And we also imported many species that were rare in captivity, such as crocodile and argus monitors, crocodile skins, Boelen's and Papuan pythons, as well as Irian Jaya death adders, taipans and brown snakes. And from China came many aberrant and albino herps, as well as rare turtles, Fea's vipers, and some seldom seen rat snakes.

Zooherp always attempted to import the best herps available, even if it meant paying higher prices. But to keep exporters satisfied we had to purchase a cross section of all the herps in stock. We had to import many species that were common in the pet trade, such as tokay geckos, baby retics, Indonesian box turtles, inexpensive snakes, tree frogs, and skinks. But it seemed like with each and every shipment, exporters would pressure us into taking larger quantities of those herps. Now, prior to all this, dealing in quantities of herps had always been against my business philosophy, not only because it increased the chances for the spread of mites and disease, but also because it was impossible to provide all these animals with adequate care. Because of the nature of the importing business, inevitably, I was becoming increasingly disenchanted with my role in the industry.

P: Is this what led you to shut down Zooherp?

L: That was part of it, but there were also other reasons. For one, zoos had always been a major part of our business,

and over the years we built cordial relations and established open-exchange programs with virtually every major zoo in the country. But in spite of our long history, during the '90s there were some surprising developments. Because of liability concerns, some zoos stopped sending us venomous snakes, and others refused to send us any more herps at all! Then came demands like periodic inspections of our facility, letters of recommendation from AZA institutions, dealer profiles, special requests for attorney documentation, indemnity forms, release forms and so on. Because of the mounting red tape, transactions would often take weeks or months to complete, and by the time shipments arrived we'd no longer need the animals.

Then came another problem. In the '90s, new dealers started importing from Indonesia. Some of these dealers would sell their animals immediately after they arrived, without health guarantees and for very low prices, and animals that didn't sell right away were discounted and sold below cost. An increase in the number of importers caused Indonesian exporters to raise their prices, just at a time when these new dealers were causing market prices to plummet. In 1994, we nearly tripled our sales, yet, on account of these developments our net dropped to where we could barely keep up with our expenditures. With no end to this trend in sight, when Kamuran announced that he would no longer serve as our purchasing agent and opted to go into business for himself, I realized that my days in the animal business were coming to a close. The decision to shut down Zooherp came in mid-1995.

P: This sounds like a very difficult time for you. How did you cope with the change?

L: When this was all happening it was one of the most horrifying periods of my life. In retrospect, however, perhaps it wasn't as traumatic as I thought. The animal business had been extremely demanding-long hours and seven days a week-and this was especially true the last couple of years when we imported so many animals. Mentally and physically I was exhausted, so in a sense this was a much-needed change.

P: What is your biggest accomplishment as a herp breeder? I'm aware that most recently you were involved with tri-colors but decided to sell most of your valuable breeding stock.

L: At a time when the closure of Zooherp was imminent, I worked out a deal in Europe to import, breed and market a colony of albino Honduran milk snakes, which were then a novelty on the market. The project was exciting and in '96 I wrote an article for The Vivarium explaining the details. Although I became very attached to the snakes, eventually I decided to terminate the project and sold the breeding stock to pursue other business endeavors.

P: I understand that you also led tours to Central and South America. Can you tell us about your involvement in the touring business?

L: You know, Phil, I've only been marginally involved in the touring business and mostly during the years of Zooherp. But let me tell you a story I don't think I've ever told anyone. One day, oh, this must have been in the late '80s, Bill Lamar picked me up at the Dallas airport on our way to a conference in Oklahoma City. Our conversation soon turned to how busy we'd become, and we lamented the fact that because of growing business demands it was becoming more difficult for us to get into the field, especially to Latin America. And then it hit us! The wildlife touring business! With so many people wanting to see the tropics, where we'd spent so much of our lives herping, it made perfect sense that we should be the ones to take them there! So we pooled our resources and advertised through Zooherp and Selva, Bill's publishing and bookselling business. This arrangement soon gave rise to Selva Tours and Expeditions, which later turned into GreenTracks, and which today is the world's leading herp eco-tour company.

Over the years, I've accompanied Bill on fabulous tours and expeditions, and we've had some incredible times-like when we took a 200-kilometer walk in pristine rain forest from the Ucayali River in Peru to the Brazilian border. And next year we're looking at a GreenTracks expedition to the Usumbara Mountains in Tanzania, which not only will present an opportunity to find some great herps, but for me it will mark a long overdue reunion in Africa with Joe Beraducci.

P: You were involved with the International Herpetological Symposium (IHS). Can you tell me a little about its history and your role?

L: The International Herpetological Symposium began in 1976 as a yearly meeting held in conjunction with a major zoo or institution. It was first known as the Annual Reptile Symposium on Captive Propagation and Husbandry, but as the meeting grew to incorporate amphibians the name changed to IHS. The meeting provides a forum for people from all over the world to present information in the field of herpetoculture, and speakers are a curious mix of scientists, breeders, hobbyists, dealers, zoo personnel, vendors and veterinarians. IHS has had a long and colorful history, and even the term "herpetoculture" was coined at one of those early meetings.

Richard Hahn originally directed the symposium, and after he stepped down the meeting continued under the guidance of several people. Although I've attended most meetings, I didn't become actively involved until 1989 when I took on the role of advisor and assisted with public relations. Later, however, I served several terms as vice-president and one as president.

During my years in office, IHS launched the journal Herpetological Natural History, which is now in its seventh volume, and we published the first volume of a special publication series, Advances in Herpetoculture. But perhaps one of the most challenging undertakings was to hold a meeting outside of the United States. We succeeded by holding the 20th anniversary meeting in Liberia, Costa Rica. Next year's (2001) meeting is scheduled for Detroit, and I understand from Don Boyer at the San Diego Zoo, who is putting together a great slate of speakers, that there's a number of old timers that are planning to attend.

P: Anyone who works around wild animals long enough has a few scars to show for it. Have you ever been bitten by a venomous species? And can you recall some of your close calls with dangerous herps?

L: You know, I must be one of those very lucky people. In the animal business, getting bitten by harmless reptiles was an everyday occurrence, but surprisingly I'm nearly scar-free. Close calls-always-they came with the territory. But you know what they say about "close" only counting in horseshoes and hand grenades!

Actually, I was once nicked by a baby western diamondback, which was one of the stupidest things I've ever done, but after handling venomous snakes for about 40 years there's no doubt that I've been extremely lucky. It's funny, but after all this time the worst bite I've ever had was from a garter snake in south Texas!

P: What activities are you presently involved in? Can you describe some of the rattlesnake research you have been conducting?

L: As far as the rattlesnake work, the last couple of years have been the most productive. After tromping around the western states for decades and finding a lot of strange looking rattlesnakes, it wasn't until I became involved with molecular studies that we began to gain a better understanding of their relationships. Along with several colleagues at Arizona State, we have a paper in press in which we partitioned the western rattlesnake group, *Crotalus viridis*. And there's another study nearing completion where we'll be presenting new information on the biology of the midget-faded rattlesnake. However, it's the fieldwork that has me all excited! In recent years we've turned up several interesting rattlesnakes in the Colorado Plateau, and early indications suggest that some of our most interesting work still lies ahead.

P: I've been pleased to publish a couple of your articles recently. Are you working on any books or other publishing projects right now?

L: Several years ago I entered the publishing business as a member of Canyonlands Publishing Group, and we came out with *Pythons of Australia* by Brian Kend and launched *Fauna* magazine. As I'm sure you well know, the magazine business is a tough one, and after three issues we had to stop the magazine's publication. But I never lost faith that some day we'd be able to resurrect it. And, Phil, it's finally happened, and these are some of the happiest days of my life! Through a new and more powerful company, we're in the process of re-launching *Fauna*.

P: What can you tell us about your new company?

L: The CEO of *Fauna, Inc.*, Bob Smith, is an excellent herper and businessman-boy, if that doesn't seem like an oxymoron! Anyway, for years Bob was trying to find a way to invest in a herp-related project through which he could contribute to conservation-much the same way the Maryland expo contributes to the purchase of rain forest. To make a long story short, the members of the new company have started a foundation through which a percentage of the company's earnings will go to worthwhile conservation projects, like the purchase of habitats or equipment for research.

And, by the way, as long as we're talking about the magazine, I'd like to take this opportunity to announce that the new company will honor all previous subscriptions, and we're urging any subscribers who have moved to contact us with updated address information.

P: Now to a more trivial question. Name your 10 favorite herps, and tell us why these are your favorites.

L: Ten favorites...how can I put this? Can you imagine someone addicted to doughnuts working in a doughnut shop? You know, when I was a kid I used to thumb through the pages of *Ditmars* and dream about owning herps like Gila monsters, spotted turtles, and anacondas-and I'll never forget the thrill of owning my first baby anaconda! But over the years it

seems it's herps that you've anticipated seeing for a long time that make a lasting impression. Take eyelash bush vipers. For years I read about them, and when I first saw them I was blown away!

But to tell you the truth, while captive animals are often exceptional and wonderful to see, when I consider my all time favorite herps, it has to be animals that I've encountered in the field, and often under special circumstances. I'd be hard pressed to pick out a top 10, but the point is that at least for me, nothing can beat the thrill of finding special animals right where they live.

P: Please describe where you envision herpetoculture going in the next decade.

L: It's only been a little over a quarter of a century that herpetoculture has grown from a handful of breeders to an enormous market. Last year an article on the front page of the Wall Street Journal estimated that about 20 million people in this country feed rodents to their snakes and other reptiles. Twenty million! That's absolutely incredible!

Changes in herpetoculture have come so rapidly that it's hard to visualize what the future will bring. Some things are a given, like the market will continue to grow and many more species and color morphs will be bred in captivity. However, if you were to ask me where I would like to see herpetoculture going during the next 10 years, well, that would be more simple. What I'd love to see are more people involved with herpetocultural projects that promote education and conservation. And more people keeping and breeding great American herps like barking tree frogs, marbled salamanders, box turtles and keeled green snakes!

P: Well, Louie, this about concludes our interview. In closing is there anything else that you'd like to say?

L: First, my sincere thanks to you and REPTILES magazine for allowing me to ramble on. And I wish to thank Randy McCranie, Ed Cassano, Val Hornyak, Mike Cardwell and Bill Lamar for providing some of the photos used with this interview. And as long as I'm giving thanks, how about a huge high five to my family, and especially my wife and my mom, who over the years have undergone countless sacrifices on account of the crazy things we herpers just seem to do!