

## Ray Ashton

### **Who's Who interview with tortoise expert Ray Ashton.**

A true herp-lover, one of Ray Ashton's first memories was of fishing with his father in a local lake. The then-3-year-old Ashton grabbed a banded water snake and held on even when the animal bit him repeatedly. Despite the bloodied arm, it took his father hollering for him to let go before Ashton finally released his "prize."

That enthusiasm never diminished. At Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, Ashton enjoyed learning from a number of herpetologists, including Paul Daniel, who introduced him to the Ohio Herp Society, and J. T. Collins, among many others. He paid his way through school via a number of jobs, including work as a "bird bander." Aside from capturing and placing tags on birds so that ornithologists could trace their migrations, he also collected herps, dragon flies, field mice, fish and plants, and taught field and lab courses.

After completing his graduate studies in biology, finishing his thesis on three salamander species and earning a teaching certificate, Ashton worked for 21 years in a variety of museums directing educational programs focused on herps and other animals. He first became interested in tortoises while planning an upland research center focused on breeding and studying herps with Walter Auffenberg. That plan became a reality 20 years later.

In 1997, Ashton and his wife, Patricia, founded the Biodiversity Research and Preservation Institute in Archer, Fla. Part of the institute is a 200-acre preserve known as Finca de la Tortuga, meaning Farm of the Turtle. The institute's purpose is to promote, fund and operate research and preservation projects. "We are doing research on the best husbandry of tortoises in captivity using a holistic approach to captive management," Ashton said.

Having been the chairman of both the Florida Committee on Rare and Endangered Plants and Animals and also on the Gopher Tortoise Council back in the 1980s, fighting for tortoise conservation has been a longstanding passion for Ashton. In 2003, he founded the Gopher Tortoise Conservation Initiative. He focused on making the public aware of the habitat destruction that was literally killing thousands of gopher tortoises in Florida. He succeeded in raising media attention and winning over many along the way, but still battles to help these chelonians.

Along with his wife Patricia, who is the president, Ashton runs their corporation, Ashton, Ashton, & Associates, Inc., an environmental consulting firm that specializes in sustainable and environmentally sound projects with an emphasis on ecotourism, tourism, greenways, parks, museums and other similar developments. Although he has retired from work this year, Ashton continues to mentor young people, fight for the conservation of a variety of reptile species and participate in research.

"It's a wonderful thing to see the excitement in folks when they get to see something special that some tortoise or herp does," Ashton said. "Because of all the folks who took the time to work with me, or write and answer questions, I feel that doing the same is an important obligation in my life."

#### **Accomplishments**

Inspiring public support for the gopher tortoise and getting it listed as threatened.

Building Punta Sal National Park near Tela Honduras, which is a refuge for many animal species.

A founder of the North Carolina Herpetological Society, The N.C. Natural History Society and the museum's the Junior Curator program. He was inducted into the N.C. Herp Hall of Fame for the research and educational programs that his organizations have provided.

Founded the All Florida Herp Conference, which has met annually since 1975.

Awarded the Florida Citizen of the Year for Conservation for his work on getting a conservation tax exemption for land owners and agriculture and silviculture folks if they manage their lands for native species and habitats.

Co-authored several books with wife Patricia including: Three volumes of the Handbook of Reptiles and Amphibians of Florida, The Gopher Tortoise: A Life History and The Natural History and Management of the Gopher Tortoise *Gopherus polyphemus*, and more than 100 papers on herps.

Founder of the Ashton Biodiversity Research and Preservation Institute in Archer, Fla.

Served as chairman for the Gopher Tortoise Council and founded the Gopher Tortoise Conservation Initiative.

Severed in many capacities with the Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles (SSAR), such as the first chairman of the liaison committee with regional societies, the zoo liaison committee, and others.

Established science teacher training programs on wildlife and wild places in a number of states in the U.S., as well as in Belize, Peru and Australia.

#### Future Projects

Studying how tortoises use low-frequency sound to communicate.

To continue to teach courses about gopher tortoise natural history and study techniques.

Continued tortoise research funded by his breeding efforts.

Focus efforts on preserving the Eastern Indigo Snake by working to change federal policy.

#### Ashton's Wisdom

1. Never trust your mother to stop the car for a snake on the road. Jumping out while the car is moving usually means you miss the snake and have a trip to the emergency room.
2. Fathers are very unhappy when snakes get lose in their first new car, especially when the snakes die in the upholstery covering the car's roof.
3. If you want your dad to leave you on the side of the road somewhere, have an adult gopher tortoise unload on you and your sister in the back seat. By the time your sister stops screaming, he will have smelled the mess and put you and the tortoise off on the shoulder of the road, and drive off while explaining to your mother that this would be the best thing for the whole family.
4. Do not leave snakes you catch on the way to the bus stop in your mail box. You will learn who the post master is very quickly and the insane rules the United States government has about such things.
5. Do not try to smuggle snakes in your shirt when riding a public bus or on an airplane. Being considered a terrorist, even back in the 1950s, was a typical response when you got caught.
6. Never try to pull porcupine quills out of an alligator's mouth with a pair of pliers while your buddy tries to hold its mouth open.
7. If you put two different herps together, the least rare, expensive or liked animal will kill, eat or pass a disease on to the other one.
8. When you get older, don't try to smuggle a 6-foot diamondback rattlesnake into the house and your collection. Your wife will know before the bag is open.