

Interview with Kevin Zipple

Interviewer: Sally Walker

Kevin Zipple is Amphibian Programme Director for both the Conservation Breeding Specialist Group CBSG and the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums WAZA to drive their activities in AArk. His enthusiastic presence at meetings and in working groups fires people up and makes them interested in the amphibian crisis whether they want to be or not. Kevin is a lean, mean machine grinding out work and action and enthusiasm, his energy undoubtedly enhanced by his single minded focus on saving the amphibians of the world and his non-destructive lifestyle which includes food habits of herbivores -- he is a strict vegan, eschewing meat, eggs and even milk products. In just over two short years Kevin Zipple has become a household word for all CBSG and WAZA members as well as many, many field biologists and researchers across the amphibian academic field.

Kevin earned his B.S. in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at Cornell University, 1994 and his Ph.D. in Zoology at University of Florida, 2000. He worked for one year (1999) as a curatorial intern in the Department of Herpetology at the Wildlife Conservation Society/Bronx Zoo while he finished his doctorate. There he was also a founding member of Project Golden Frog, a conservation organization he continues to serve as coordinator.

Kevin then went on to work five years as Curator of Amphibians at the Detroit Zoo. With Herp Curator Andy Snider, Kevin oversaw the construction and initial years of operation of the National Amphibian Conservation Center, which won the 2002 American Zoo & Aquarium Association's Exhibit of the Year Award. With course coordinator Andy Odum, Kevin helped develop AZA's Amphibian Biology & Management course, which has run annually since 2004 with derivative courses now having run in Mexico, Ecuador, and Colombia with plans for Venezuela and Tanzania. During his years in Detroit, he developed adjunct associate professor status at Michigan State University and George Mason University.

In 2005, Kevin joined CBSG as the Amphibian Program Officer, a joint position with WAZA, to help the ex situ community develop and implement plans to stem the amphibian extinction crisis. These efforts evolved into the Amphibian Ark. Kevin and wife Lynn live on "Huellita Farms," their 45-acre homestead near Montezuma Wildlife Refuge in Central New York. A very busy person, it was good of Kevin to agree to be interviewed. We at ANSA and the other relevant networks, ZOO, and WILD are happy to be able to introduce you to him. To access his list of publications and even open some of them go to the CBSG website www.cbsg.org and type kevin zipple into their search device which has a link to his publications.



Q. Hi Kevin. Thanks for agreeing to this interview. Can we start right off by asking you how you happened to become so very passionate about amphibians? Was there some experience in your childhood or what?

A. I don't think there was anything exceptional about my childhood that led me specifically to amphibians. Certainly my parents instilled in me a sense of wonder and appreciation for the natural world and encouraged my interests in studying it. But upstate New York is not exactly known for its impressive herpetofauna! Maybe that is why I became enamored of herps specifically, because they seemed so exotic. I studied biology in college, focusing on herps. But the more I studied, the more I came to the inescapable conclusion that, for me, it was unacceptable to study a group that so desperately needed advocates, not neutral observers. So I became and advocate for amphibians as well as a student.

Q. Are you primarily a field biologist or a captive manager? or some of both ?

Neither, nowadays! I am a paper pusher! In my heart, I am a field biologist. There is simply nothing finer than observing a species behaving naturally in its native environment. Of course, I am also very interested in captive management, both for the opportunity for study not afforded by occasional trips to the field, but more importantly now, as a vital conservation tool. But absolutely, if you gave me a choice between visiting the best zoo in the world or the pond behind it where the most common amphibians breed, I'll be knee-deep in the pond as fast as I can!

Q. How did you get in touch with the Conservation Breeding Specialist Group, and the World Association of Zoos, your current employers.

A. Serendipity. Within a year after I left the National Amphibian Conservation Center for life back in upstate New York, I saw an email that CBSG was having their annual meeting at my local zoo and amphibians were on the agenda (this was the year following publication of the GAA). Having known CBSG Chair Bob Lacy from a Puerto Rican crested toad PHVA, I wrote him asking if I could be of any use in meeting. He invited me to give a talk about amphibian conservation and participate in a working group. I couldn't stay for much of the working group because I had to get back to teaching (my interim employment), but one of the recommendations from that group was that CBSG/WAZA needed to do something to address the amphibian extinction crisis, and the first step should be to hire someone to formulate that response. The rest, as they say, was history.

Q. Before the SSC announced the results of the Global Amphibian Assessment (GAA), were you aware of the extent of decline of amphibians ?

A. No, and I'm not sure anyone was. We were certainly all aware that many amphibian populations around the world were declining, some even disappearing. But I certainly wasn't prepared for the sobering statistics to come from the GAA: over 120 amphibian species already extinct in the past few decades, between one third and one half of the remaining ~6000 species currently threatened with extinction, and nearly half declining. We learned that, other than gymnosperms, amphibians were the most imperiled group of organisms. This is the greatest extinction crisis in the history of amphibians, and one of the greatest taxon-specific conservation challenges in the history of humanity.

Q. Did you ever see yourself in a position of being able to impact so many people as you are ... you are playing a key role in an important conservation community. How does it feel ?

A. I am not sure my impact has been as significant as you think or as I wish! But I am thrilled with the opportunity to reach out to so many people. The responsibility of the task can be crushing, but I do my best to channel that into motivation to push onward and help our partners succeed.

Q. I know you are a vegan and in all your talks you highlight the importance of people changing their habits in order to literally save the world ... can you give me some history on that and how you came to these beliefs...

A. Everyone knows that people are both the problem and the solution to our environmental woes. You and I and our colleagues have dedicated our careers to conservation, but how many of us

make the requisite changes in our lifestyles? One of the most profoundly effective decisions one can make, beyond whether to have biological children, is diet.

Most of us in the "zoo industry" have a profound affinity with wildlife. Some might relate to the animals as individuals and are driven primarily by issues of welfare and enrichment; others cherish the awesome diversity of life and strive toward conservation of species and habitats. Perhaps you have dedicated years of your life to studying animals in the wild or in captivity, or maybe you are just that person who at parties always ends up spending more time socializing with the cat than with other people. The majority of us certainly share both sentiments to some extent, and as a result we have dedicated our lives to an industry whose goal is to save animals, preserve habitat, and change the attitude and behavior of others to do the same.

So why is it that most of us do not think twice about the impact of our diet on the environment and animals we care so much about? Why is it that we zoo people, one of the planet's most compassionate groups when it comes to issues of animal welfare and conservation, are still predominately carnivores? Let us disregard for now the ethics of carnivory. We won't debate here the psychological and social abuses suffered by animals reared on factory farms. We won't comment on the hypocrisy of how we cringe watching dogs being sold in a Vietnamese food market but fail to see the atrocity that is the beef industry from the eyes of a Hindu. And we certainly won't discuss how world hunger, starvation, and widespread famine could be stopped today if everyone simply became vegetarian, how we currently feed almost 3/4 of the world's grains to farmed animals, and through the attrition of ascending trophic levels, sacrifice 90% of the original protein, 99% of the carbs, and 100% of the fiber we started with. And for the moment we will forget about the impact of carnivory on our health. We will disregard the simple and inarguable fact that meat kills, that it is "the number one cause of death and disease in America", and that "one out of every two Americans alive today will die of cardiovascular disease, usually in the form of a heart attack." Like the beef commercials, we will ignore the fact that meat, eggs and dairy products provide the majority of saturated fats in our diet and all the cholesterol, substances which work together to clog arteries (atherosclerosis) and beg heart attack, stroke, and male impotency. We will go on believing that cardiovascular disease is a "natural" cause of death because it is so common, and overlook that the rates of heart disease (our #1 killer) and all forms of cancer (#2) for vegetarians are about 1/2 that of carnivores, and for vegans about 1/10th. We also won't discuss all the research linking carnivory with osteoporosis, diabetes, hypertension, gastrointestinal disorders, arthritis, asthma, and

anemia, or that 95% of the DDT entering our bodies comes from meat and dairy, or that nursing carnivore mothers have almost 100 times the residual pesticides in their milk as their vegetarian counterparts.

For this point, let us focus solely on the impact of human carnivory on the environment and on the wildlife we claim to cherish. UN research shows that the production of animals for food creates more greenhouse gases than all forms of transport combined and is one of the top contributors to climate change, biodiversity loss, and degradation of the land, air, and water. Please, read the UN report "Livestock's Long Shadow" (<ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/010/a0701e/a0701e.pdf>). Reducing the amount of meat, eggs, and dairy products in your diet is one of the simplest and most effective ways YOU can help save the planet.

Q. We have discussed the role of captive breeding in amphibian conservation and we differ in some areas and levels. Do you really think captive breeding is one of THE answers? How effective do you think it can be?

A. Captive management is one of the answers. Not my first choice, as we can all agree that species that can be saved in the wild should be saved in the wild. But when the threats are beyond our control, and the options are extinction or captive management, the choice is obvious to an idealist like me. Of course there are pragmatic issues that can influence our ideals, and I know you deal with these in your job.

Q. Some countries do not have good conditions for managing delicate species like amphibians. Do you think it is worthwhile encouraging them to do captive breeding? or to capture threatened frogs from the wild on the off chance they might be able to breed a few?

A. The idealist in me says that if a species is going to go extinct in the wild anyway, then why not do the best we can under given circumstances to save that species in captivity? If we succeed, great. If we fail, then the outcome is the same as if we had done nothing. But you Sally have helped open my eyes to the fact that sometimes failure in captivity can actually be worse than not having tried, as it can tarnish the image of the *ex situ* conservation community in the eyes of others, thereby making it more difficult for us to take on projects where success is more likely. I understand that situation, but my inner idealist says that the answer is not to turn a blind eye to those amphibians in need, but rather to educate the critics about the true nature of the situation and that failure in captivity is an acceptable risk.

Q. Do you think the funds we are raising for captive breeding facilities could not find a better use which might preserve more habitat and let amphibian survive in the wild ...

A. Apples and oranges. I think most of the money we raise is available because of the captive component and our sources would not be as receptive to requests to protect land. Certainly habitat must be protected, both to secure those species that can be saved in the wild and to ensure that those species requiring rescue will have a place to return. But it is my experience that money for habitat protection comes from different sources, and while AArk focuses on the species requiring rescue, we support our partners working toward habitat preservation. Neither endeavor is viable without the other.

Kevin's Publications

<http://www.cbsg.org/cbsg/staff/display.asp?id=366>

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