

Since my very first memories I have always had a huge obsession with animals and, like others in this field, the seeds were sown very early. Growing up in the city of Bristol my opportunities for hands-on nature were quite limited until my holidays, when I would stay with my grandparents in the Wiltshire countryside overlooking Bath. It was here that I spent much of my time playing in the fields and farmyards, never knowing what morsels and curios of natural history I might find next.

Every available opportunity that came my way as a boy would always be turned into an animal extravaganza; my family and friends would groan at the thought of yet another zoo trip when my birthday came around each year. Bristol Zoo almost became home from home for me, although from an ethical point of view it was not at that time the best place for animal lovers and conservationists. However, it was an oasis of exotic life in the centre of Bristol city. I would spend hours, whilst my friends played on the swings and slides, watching the monkeys as they tumbled up and down the monkey temple. I even remember early encounters with my pencils trying to draw the sad polar bear as he paced from side to side in his hideous tiny concrete enclosure. Thankfully that has now changed.

As a family we always had pets, such as cats, gerbils and the like, but it was when I reached my teens that I started to long for something more. I was desperate to work as a zookeeper, not knowing that it was seldom rewarding work or that the hours were long with terrible pay. It was just the chance to be one of the privileged few who get close to many animals. Realistically I would only ever get close to them in a book. My first chance to rectify this came when one day I spotted a turtle for sale in a local pet shop and, after saving my money and weeks of nagging, I finally obtained him for myself. In my own little way this was my way of experiencing at first hand what it is like to care for an animal and learn about its dietary needs, habits and husbandry. Although Tom Turtle, as he became known, lived with me for over 18 years I cannot say they were all the happiest of times for him.

Like most boys who grew up in or near the countryside, close

encounters with nature were often quite common, from playing with the giant ants' nests to finding adders under old tree trunks. All of it inspired me more in the hope that I might one day have a career working with animals in some way. Apart from some wayward years during my teens when I went through all the usual rebellious activities, my love of the animal kingdom never went away. My hands-on experience went into overdrive in my very early twenties when I developed a keen interest in keeping reptiles and amphibians. This all started when, looking for a companion for Tom Turtle, I met a kindred spirit who also kept turtles. Before long we had set up a society for chelonian enthusiasts which, over six months, slowly developed into a rescue service for red-eared terrapins. A few years earlier there had been a mad craze for buying these creatures. After the "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle" films this was starting to wear off and people were becoming tired of their pets. Red-eared terrapins, despite being sold in ordinary pet shops for next to nothing, are extremely hard work to keep well and successfully. They require a lot of cleaning, they smell a lot and they grow very fast, with ravenous appetites. With the scares at the time that terrapins carry salmonella it was a rather convenient excuse for many people to discard their pets in streams, ponds and rivers. Salmonella can only be caught from terrapins if you eat their flesh or faeces. So as the newly formed Turtle and Terrapin Society, we found ourselves catching and rescuing dozens of these poor reptiles which had been illegally dumped in the wild, ruining the English ecosystem.

Before long we were getting calls on all kinds of reptiles and creepy-crawlies. I remember one night getting a call to go to the rescue of a girl who had brought back a stowaway spider from an exotic location. Not that I was much good as I am terrified of spiders! I went in vain and never found the spider, but left behind a still very scared girl.

We were often quoted in the local paper for our opinions, hence the number of calls we received grew, and so Maria my future wife, and I, eventually had a room full of wall-to-wall tanks and vivariums containing all kinds of turtles and creatures. I would often be sitting watching the television when



Top Left: Sumatran orangutan from Bukit Luang, Gunung Leuser National Park.



Middle Left: Pileated gibbon, South East Asia.



Bottom Left: Some rather cheeky squirrel monkeys from Manuel Antonio National Park, Costa Rica.



Bottom Right: Baby tumandua (tree anteater), Guyana. Never have I met an animal so intent on going about his business, he was not bothered in the slightest by my presence.