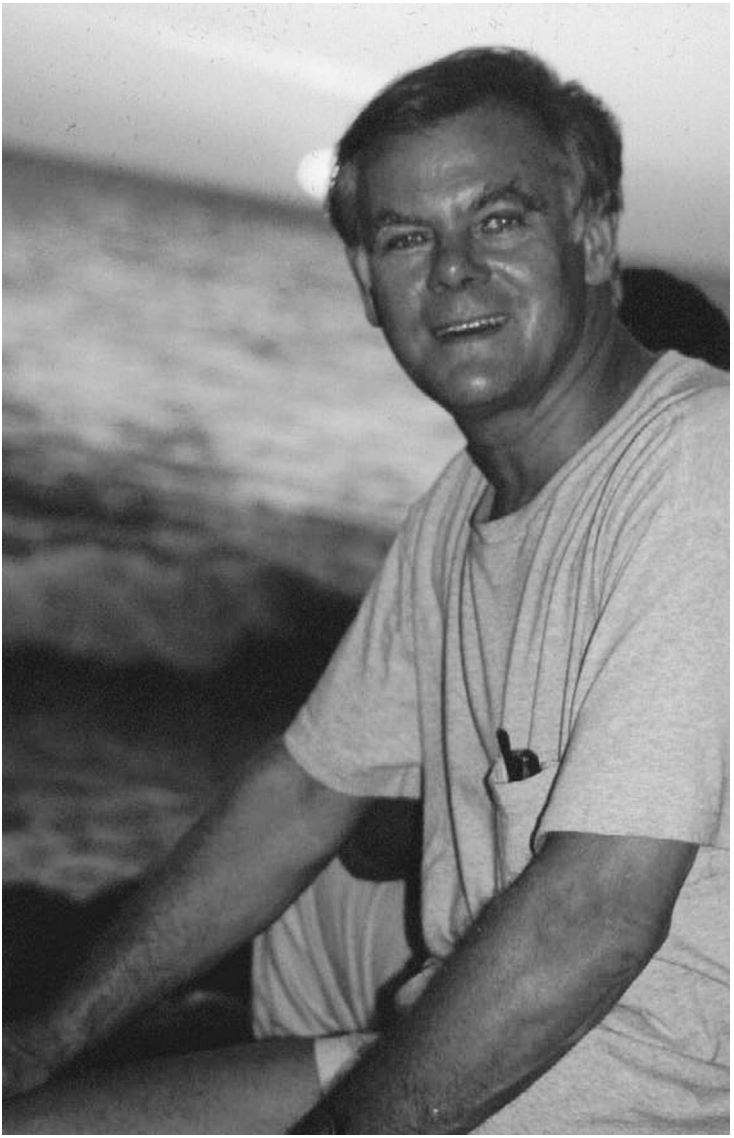
APPLIED HERPETOLOGY 2: 89-97



In Memory
Michael R.K. Lambert, 1941-2004

Michael R.K. Lambert

Our founding editor, Michael Lambert, died on 18 July 2004 after a two-year battle with plasmacytoma. This issue of the journal has been prepared as a tribute to Michael, including his final paper submitted on 30 June. Characteristically, Michael had continued to work and remain positive; the submission of this paper, which seemed to herald improved health, instead marked his wish to contribute to the journal to the end. Michael was active in many organisations, who will probably publish their own obituaries; this contribution will consider especially the background to *Applied Herpetology*. Since the launch, several herpetologists told us that they had thought of a similar journal – what enabled Michael to bring this timely idea to fruition? I am grateful to Roger Avery, Donato Ballasina, John Cooper, Ulrich Joger, Yehudah Werner, and Vanya Lambert for help with preparing this obituary.

Michael Roderick Kirkby Lambert was born in London on 3 November 1941. He was educated as a boarder at Claymore School in Dorset, an area which would have provided many herpetological opportunities. Michael remembered school as being a hard life, but acknowledged that it had provided good training for rigorous field trips later on. He then went to Trinity College, Dublin, achieving honours in botany (1965) and zoology (1966). Michael was a contemporary there of Peter Davies, later at the University of Nottingham, so that Trinity College had a notable impact in producing British herpetologists, despite the unpromising Irish fauna.

The general biology training was followed, after a brief stint as a science teacher, by a career in entomology and applied biology at the Anti-Locust Research Centre, London (1967-1970) and its successors, the Centre for Overseas Pest Research (1970-1983), the Tropical Development and Research Institute (1983-1987), the Overseas Development Natural Resources Institute (1987-1990), which later moved to Chatham as the Field Ecology Resources Centre (1990-1995) and merged with the University of Greenwich as the Natural Resources Institute (1995-2001). The several changes of name tend to obscure Michael's loyalty to the institution, which was characteristic of him, maintaining relationships with several organisations over four decades. Another example is Birkbeck College, University of London, where Michael took a Ph.D. in entomology in 1975. He retained an interest in Birkbeck, later being honoured by instauration as a Fellow (Connor, 2003).

The British tradition of applied zoological work in the Empire and Commonwealth has been described by Alan Hodgkin (1992) — though he was deflected into basic physiology — among others. Michael's career came at the end of this tradition, and in his case the stimulus was undoubtedly a combination of interest in zoology, love of travel, and a desire to assist those in less advantageous situations to help themselves through agricultural development. The Ph.D. at Birkbeck involved work on cage-bred locusts in London, and field work on plague locusts in New South Wales, attached to the CSIRO Division of Entomology, Canberra (Lambert,

Figure 1. Michael Lambert (right) on an early field trip.

1972, 1974). His first three years at the Anti-Locust Research Centre involved field work monitoring grasshoppers on the River Niger, red bollworms in Malawi, and African armyworms in Tanzania, a pattern of diverse travel that was to continue. In later years Michael's professional activities mostly involved organising and running training workshops on pest control. He was an able communicator, who was as comfortable and effective among peasant farmers as academics or administrators. His characteristic use of public transport in Africa or Central Asia was commendable as he could have travelled by car — he simply wanted to meet the people whom he was trying to help, in their own environment. I believe that this attitude would have been appreciated. In Zimbabwe, foreign aid workers were sometimes dismissively known as "Pajeros" after their typical mode of transport, insulated from ordinary life, when away from their international hotels; Michael Lambert was not of that type.

Michael was at heart a professional applied zoologist, dedicated to using biological science to improve the lot of people, especially in the developing world. He had a talent for organisation, at which he may have been too successful, being diverted from research. He always tried to interest his employers in applied work using herpetofauna, and had succeeded in this at the end of his career (references in Lambert, 2005), only to be frustrated by enforced retirement at the age of 60, compulsory for civil servants in Britain. He was rather aggrieved that colleagues in the same office

who were employed by the University of Greenwich could work until they were 65, and rightly felt that he still had much to offer. This enforced early retirement was undoubtedly one stimulus to the founding of *Applied Herpetology*, where he could contribute independently of the constraints of official life. In retrospect, the early retirement was a blessing, enabling Michael to devote more time in the last years to his health (though he rarely mentioned this) and loved ones.

While Michael's professional activity was entomology and pest control, his special interest was herpetology, in particular tortoises. Michael perhaps first experienced these animals in the wild on an expedition to the High Atlas mountains and the Sahara, which he led while an undergraduate. He returned to Morocco after graduation, for independent research on behalf of the World Wildlife Fund, which resulted in an important paper (Lambert, 1969) drawing attention to the overexploitation of Mediterranean tortoises for the pet trade. The RSPCA subsequently sponsored Michael to make a return visit to North Africa (Lambert, 1979), and this work eventually led to the banning of imports of *Testudo graeca* and *T. hermanni* into Britain (RSPCA, 1981). Michael wrote three major papers on the ecology and conservation of *Testudo* in North Africa and Turkey (Lambert 1981, 1982, 1983) as a result of these field studies. At this time he also organised the Second European Chelonian Symposium in Oxford (1981), and edited and introduced its proceedings (Testudo **2**, 1-32, 1983, and Amphibia-Reptilia **5**, 1-80, 1984; Lambert, 1984). My first personal contact with Michael came in 1980, when preparing for an expedition to Greece to study *Testudo hermanni*. I remember most his lasting enthusiasm for our work, even though studies in France and Greece eventually superseded his own due to the much greater tortoise population densities compared with those in North Africa. Indeed, he was typically gracious even under direct criticism, as when we developed alternative methods of measuring abundance: "I cannot understand how I erred in this for your explanation is so simple!" (in litt., 9 March 1987). A pity that all academic disputes are not settled so politely; but Michael was unusual among scientists in this respect.

Low population densities never deterred Michael — indeed, they were a major characteristic of his tortoise field sites. There is a great difference between studying a population where several animals may be seen each hour, compared with one where a whole day in the hot sun results (if lucky) in a single sighting. After *Testudo*, Michael worked on *Geochelone* species in various African countries, often at even lower population densities (Lambert, 1993, 1995, Lambert et al. 1998). He once told me that one per month would be a typical sighting frequency for *G. sulcata* in Mali, his own work there being mostly on captive specimens. Few people have the fortitude to persist at such low densities, which is one reason why Michael's studies are of great value as an environmental record. Michael's herpetological field work was mostly done alone, perhaps as a break from the group activities of his civil service job, but he did occasionally collaborate, particularly in the analysis of data (Robson and Lambert, 1980; Lambert et al., 1988; Lambert et al., 1998; Hailey and Lambert, 2002).

Michael was active in several societies, at the meetings of which he was good company and often very amusing. He was the honorary secretary and later chairman of the British Herpetological Society from 1976-1991, a member of the executive committee of the World Congress of Herpetology from 1983-1993, and general secretary of the Societas Europaea Herpetologica from 1995-2004. He was also a joint founder and member since 1980 of the IUCN Species Survival Commission Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group, and a member of their African Reptile and Amphibian Specialist Group from 1993. Michael was in addition a member of several herpetological societies in Africa, Europe and the USA, and of the Linnean and Zoological Societies of London, Fauna and Flora International, the Institute of Biology (of which he was elected a Fellow in 1997), and the Royal Geographical Society.

Michael made many field trips to exotic locations in the course of his career. In some cases the herpetological results were published as papers (Joger and Lambert, 1996, 2002), but most appeared as semi-popular articles in early issues of the British Journal of Herpetology (1967-1970), then in the Newsletter and its successor the Bulletin of the British Herpetological Society. Reference to the Zoological Record shows some 30 of these articles between 1967 (Brit. J. Herpetol. **3**, 303-306; Corsica) and 2002 (Bull. Brit. Herpetol. Soc. **79**, 7-13; Kazakhstan). This series of articles, perhaps unique in recent herpetological literature, had I believe two main aims. First, Michael wished to provide interesting reading for amateur members of the British Herpetological Society, whom he sought to encourage in every way. This wish was based on the recognition that the membership of the British Herpetological Society was (and remains) largely amateur, unlike the major herpetological societies in the USA, and in particular contrast to the Societas Europaea Herpetologica that was founded specifically for professionals. The second aim was to encourage herpetology in new locations, especially in the Commonwealth. Many of the articles were written with local co-authors, to stimulate herpetological activity in developing countries. The series (modestly never described as such) indicates Michael's far-flung travels including the USA, Jamaica, Brazil, Romania, Israel, Cyprus, Jersey, Malta, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, and Ethiopia.

I am not sure when Michael first had the idea of applied herpetology as a science needing its own journal. The initial public appearance was a poster at the Third World Congress of Herpetology in Prague in 1997. By 2001 he had persuaded the publishers Brill to sponsor a journal, and organised a plenary workshop at the Fourth World Congress of Herpetology in Sri Lanka (fig. 2). In the event, *Applied Herpetology* ended up in the unusual situation of a journal not associated with an academic society. This was not Michael's original intent — he tried to interest his fellow council members of the Societas Europaea Herpetologica in the new journal, only to be rejected apparently because of a fear of competition with their existing Amphibia-Reptilia (Anonymous, 2001). This was not the first time that Michael was frustrated by lack of imagination in herpetological organisations. He had been involved in negotiations in the early 1980s for the merging of the

Figure 2. Michael Lambert addressing the plenary workshop on applied herpetology at the Fourth World Congress of Herpetology, Sri Lanka, 6 December 2001. (Photograph by Yehudah Werner.)

British Journal of Herpetology, published by the British Herpetological Society, and the Journal of Herpetology published in the USA by the Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles. That would have produced an international herpetological journal offered jointly by the two societies, along the lines of Animal Behaviour. Regrettably, that initiative also foundered; it would almost certainly have promoted the professionalism of herpetology in Britain and the rest of Europe and brought progress forward by many years. The lack of organisational sponsorship of *Applied Herpetology* was in the end solved in an imaginative way — by being made available to members of any herpetological society or group at a heavily discounted rate. So what did enable Michael to turn the idea of applied herpetology into the journal you are reading? Perhaps it was his combination of determination, persuasiveness and charm.

Michael had a highly characteristic type of Englishness, including a love of pink Laurent Perrier and good food and music, and a strong English accent when speaking foreign languages, including French, Italian, Spanish, German and Swahili. Ulrich Joger (in litt., 29 October 2004) notes that he was distantly related to the Royal family, a connection that Michael rarely mentioned. He was sometimes irreverently but affectionately known as "Bertie Wooster" among younger *Testudo* workers, after the P.G. Wodehouse character (but not for any ineffectuality). Michael readily admitted that he was perhaps a throwback to an earlier colonial period, but was also always ready to laugh at the British mentality. He used the same idiom as

the Royals, even in the African bush, and was a "larger than life" character of a kind that has now been entirely squeezed out of the university system.

His many foreign friends regarded Michael as being "110% British", and a perfect, unexcitable companion to rely on in the field. Donato Ballasina (in litt., 12 October 2004) has related a typical story, of a trip to Senegal in 1996 to set up a project on *Geochelone sulcata*. The Customs were proving difficult, examining the luggage of all arrivals in great detail, with every indication of a very long delay. Michael went up to the customs officer, pointed to himself and to the luggage, and said "Je suis ... serviteur ... de Sa Majesté ... la reine de l'Empire Brittanique". They were saluted and welcomed to Senegal with no inspection or delay. "You see, my friend, you must know how to act in Africa", Michael said, and started to laugh. Ulrich Joger recalled his toughness in the field, when travelling in Africa with virtually no luggage except a mosquito net, a change of clothes, and a toothbrush. Ulrich had brought a tent and sleeping bag, but Michael made do in the open with only the net and a thin mattress, and was reluctant to use the tent even during heavy rain. A mosquito-bitten night in a dirty Dakar hotel was met with typical understatement — "not exactly as in Hampton Court". The good food was replaced by spaghetti and tomato sauce seven days a week.

The strongest point of Michael's character was, perhaps, his ability and will to bring people together, and to convince them of the good capacities of others. As a result, he had a tremendous number of friends worldwide. He got on well with American herpetologists and organisations — the possible merging of the British Journal of Herpetology and the Journal of Herpetology largely foundered because of resistance from the British end. Michael organised a symposium on herpetological ecotoxicology at the Third World Congress of Herpetology, which the Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles were interested in publishing as a monograph. (It still appears on internet book sites as "Amphibian and Reptilian Ecotoxicology: Papers from the Third World Congress of Herpetology, edited by Michael Lambert, to be published by SSAR".) That project failed as several of the papers were never received in written form, but those which were acceptable later appeared in the first issue of *Applied Herpetology*.

Michael's first marriage, to Marilyn, ended with her death in 1994; they are survived by a daughter Katharine. His later years were illuminated by a second marriage, to Vanya in 2000 with, typically, a reception at the Houses of Parliament in London. Vanya, a journalist, has described Michael's courageous response to plasmacytoma, under pseudonyms which can now be discarded (Richards, 2004). A leg pain apparent after returning from Sri Lanka in February 2002 was diagnosed as malignant plasma cells on the surface of the pelvis. Radiotherapy worked for a while but symptoms resurfaced in August, when the disease had progressed to multiple myeloma, with plasma cells inside the bone marrow being affected. This disease is incurable, and chemotherapy and stem cell transplants could only offer predicted remission of 9 and 18 months. Michael endured both treatments, including harvesting stem cells by passing all his blood through a cell separator, and exposure

to a highly toxic drug. Hair loss was the least serious consequence of this procedure, which itself has a 2% mortality rate. I was greatly impressed by Michael's positive attitude in the face of this illness, but had not appreciated that he was also in considerable pain, of which he showed no hint. Most friends were unaware of his condition; those who he told were given the most positive interpretation — "my specialist tells me that there is so much new research going on that this will become no more than a chronic disease, like diabetes". We have lost a courageous man as well as a visionary organiser in herpetology.

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