

OBITUARY

Richard Carl Vogt (1949–2021)

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Richard Carl Vogt was born in Madison, Wisconsin, on 6 August 1949 and that may have been the last time anyone used his whole name. To the world, he was just Dick Vogt. He explored the wilds of Wisconsin as a youth, and completed Bachelors (1967–1971) and Masters Degrees (1974) at the University of Wisconsin. That was the background he needed to write his first book, *The Natural History of Amphibians and Reptiles in Wisconsin*, published in 1981, three years after he completed his doctoral thesis entitled *Systematics and Ecology of the False Map Turtle Complex* (*Gratemys pseudogeographica*), supervised by William G. Reeder, also at the University of Wisconsin. Although he would continue to dabble in studies of other amphibian and reptilian taxa, and even co-authored a paper describing a new species of pit viper (*Cerrophidion petlalcalensis*), it was during his Ph.D. that he fixated on turtles and from that time on just about everything else was peripheral to his studies of chelonians.

Dick was awarded a scholarship by the Richard Mellon Foundation to study at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh in 1978 and he remained there until 1981 under the mentorship of C. J. (Jack) McCoy. McCoy had a major influence on Dick. Although I never heard him mention his parents, Dick often referred to the influence of his mentor, and they published 11 papers together. He was shocked when McCoy died of a heart attack at age 58 in 1993. During his time at the Carnegie Museum, Dick also collaborated extensively



Dick working on temperature-dependent sex determination in Wisconsin. Photo from Dick's personal collection, photographer unknown.

with James J. Bull on studies of sex determination in turtles and they co-authored seven papers, two in collaboration with Jack McCoy. The paper by Bull and Vogt published in *Science* is one of the most cited papers on temperature-dependent sex determination (Bull and Vogt, 1979).

Dick moved to Mexico in 1981 and was employed as a researcher at the Los Tuxtlas Tropical Biology Station of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, where he was also adjunct professor in the Science Faculty. He remained there until 2000 and, although he co-edited the book *Historia Natural de Los Tuxtlas*, most of his publications in that period related to

other areas. I attended the Joint Annual Meeting of the Herpetologist's League & Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles organized by Dick and G. Casas-Andreu in Veracruz in 1987. Dick invited me to Los Tuxtlas afterward and gave me tips on catching turtles, so I suggested that he visit Manaus, which he did as a visiting professor in 1989. He supervised students from Brazil and published with them on Amazonian turtles throughout the 1990s before finally moving definitively to Manaus in 2000. As a result of these diverse experiences, Dick often mixed English, Spanish and Portuguese in the one sentence, which meant that you sometimes had to concentrate to get the gist of his message.

Dick was employed by the Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas da Amazônia (INPA) as a level III researcher, which gave him freedom to concentrate on his turtle research. The studies of Dick and his students resulted in over 100 papers on aspects of turtle biology ranging from taxonomy to diet and reproduction. However, the study that most gained the attention of the world scientific community was co-authored with Camila Ferrara and Renata Sousa-Lima on turtle vocalizations as the first evidence of post-hatching parental care in chelonians (Ferrara et al. 2012). The concentrations of female *Podocnemis expansa* that remain around nesting beaches for months after egg laying had been noted before, but no-one imagined that those behemoth mothers were waiting for the tiny babies to hatch so that they could call to them and lead them on the annual migrations of hundreds of kilometers. Dick and his collaborators had shown that far from being simple automatons of interest only to dedicated herpetologists, turtles are fascinating creatures with complex behaviors and communication systems. You only have to know how to listen to what they are saying!

Dick had not forgotten Mexico, and he collaborated with John Legler on the definitive book on Mexican turtles, *The Turtles of Mexico: Land and Freshwater Forms*, published in 2013. John died in 2014, taking much of his great store

of information on New World and Australian turtles to the grave with him. I remember Dick bringing John to my study site in 2012 and I was worried that John might not be able to make it back up the hill because he used a walking stick with four supports and was obviously frail. I was even more worried when he asked to borrow a diving mask to look for turtles and hobbled over to the stream. I told him that it was almost impossible to find turtles during the day, but he tipped into the water and paddled off. It was less than 10 minutes later that he swam back holding a turtle! Without Dick, I am sure that John Legler's greatest contribution to the study of Mexican turtles would never have come about and the book is an unusual example of collaboration between two great herpetologists. The Mexican turtle *Kinosternon vogti* was named in Dick's honor in 2018.

Dick was a Researcher 1A of Brazil's National Science Foundation (CNPq), which is the highest level attainable, and in 2012 he received a grant from Petrobras, Brazil's national oil company, to create the Center for Study of Amazonian Chelonians (CEQUA), with a large building and display tanks for turtles in INPA's "Science Forest", which is a major tourist attraction and educational center in Manaus. In 2014 he won the coveted Behler Turtle Conservation Award. He also won a grant for a National Science Institute, which is the largest scientific financial award given in Brazil. However, the unstable political situation in Brazil in recent years meant that he did not receive all that was promised and he had great difficulty supporting CEQUA in the last few years, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dick supervised ten undergraduate theses, 37 Masters dissertations and 11 doctoral theses. Many of the students he supervised are now university professors working in critical areas for turtle conservation. Dick's love of turtles was contagious and I attribute to this the number of students who were willing to devote the great effort needed to study turtles in the Amazon.

Now, 30 years after he first started working in Brazil, it is hard to imagine how the state of art of turtle biology and conservation would have been if he had never come, but it would surely have been much poorer.

Not all was turtles. Dick met and married Oneide soon after he started visiting Manaus. Oneide is as tall and elegant as Dick was squat and turtle-like. They complemented each other in other ways. As with most couples, they had their ups and downs, but Oneide basically looked after Dick from their first outings nightclubbing in Manaus till his last days in hospital. They unsuccessfully tried to open a restaurant to attend to Dick's love of cooking and Oneide's interest in the performing arts, they successfully raised two sons of whom Dick was inordinately proud, and Oneide often assisted Dick in field work. Their stories are so intermingled that it is hard for me to remember how Dick was before he met Oneide.

When Dick gave me a copy of his book on Wisconsin amphibians and reptiles many years ago, he wrote in the cover "But wondering what would have happened had one of us been a woman!" I didn't say so, but I thought at the time that if I had been a woman I probably would have avoided him like the plague because he was prone to making sexist comments that were denigrating to women. He probably would have said that he was treating women as equals and his comments were just words, but words can hurt and sometimes harm. Dick would pay heavily for his callousness.

His private behavior did not change in later years. He continued to make the same comments to men and women friends that he knew would not be offended, but he altered his public discourse. Dick was sick during the Latin American Herpetology Congress in Quito in 2017 and could not present his paper. As the time slot had to be maintained, I suggested to the session coordinator that they present Dick's slides even though he was not there to explain them. It was only after they agreed that I had second thoughts in case there was sexist material

in the slides. However, all the slides were appropriate and the legends explicative, so I and the audience learned much about turtle vocalizations.

In 2018, Dick was nominated for the Herpetologist's League Distinguished Herpetologist Award. Some members thought, appropriately, that the award should not be given to someone who had made sexist statements at previous meetings. However, they were unable to stop the nomination through the regular channels, so they hatched a nefarious plan. Speakers had to leave their slides with the organizers before their talk, so a researcher who had been deeply offended by Dick at previous meetings modified the slides by putting black boxes over the women's shorts and tops, giving the impression that they were naked. She did not, however, black out the clothes of the men in the pictures who were also appropriately dressed for work on tropical beaches.

Dick and the audience were surprised when photographs of apparently naked women appeared on the screen, but responsibility did not fall on the shoulders of those who had committed the crime. Adulterating someone else's photos was unethical and deeply insulting to the dedicated female researchers and volunteers who appeared in the photos, including Dick's wife. Many of Dick's women collaborators leapt to his defense and a major state funding agency published the original photos in its website to show that there was nothing unseemly in them. However, the damage was done and the news swept the world that an eminent herpetologist had used inappropriate photographs in his presentation. Dick was devastated.

I last saw Dick in November 2020. We were at a celebration dinner for a student we had co-supervised who had defended his thesis. Dick was worried about COVID-19 and said that he was taking the cocktail of drugs recommended by the Brazilian government as prophylaxis. I told him that those drugs had been proven ineffective against COVID-19 and could cause dangerous side effects for someone, such as

Dick, who was overweight, had previously had a heart attack, had bone defects requiring two hip replacements and a liver that had suffered from many years of heavy drinking. However, he did not stop the treatment and when he was admitted to hospital in January 2021 after a heart attack, the doctors said that he did not have COVID-19, but was suffering from the side effects of the drugs; they could not save him.

Dick Vogt was a character, and I suspect that he sometimes purposefully presented a caricature of himself at public events. Few people who interacted with him were indifferent to him; most loved him, but some detested him. Nevertheless, in the long term, he will not be

remembered for the quirks of his personality. He will be remembered as the person who probably contributed more to our knowledge of New World chelonians than any other researcher of his generation. Thank you Dick.

Literature Cited

- Bull, J. J. & R. C. Vogt. 1979. Temperature-dependent sex determination in turtles. *Science* 206:1186-1188. DOI: 10.1126/science.505003.
- Ferrara, C., R. C. Vogt & R. S. Sousa-Lima. 2012. Turtle vocalizations as the first evidence of posthatching parental care in chelonians. *Journal of Comparative Psychology* 127:24-32. DOI: 101037/a0029656.



(A) Dick with his first-born son Riandro in Manaus in September 2000. Photo by Bill Magnusson. (B) Dick with Walter Hödl at the Joint Herpetology and Ichthyology Meeting in Manaus that Dick organized in 2003. Photo by Rafael Bernhard. (C) Dick with a Tucunaré that he plans to convert into a delicious dinner. Photo by Camila Ferrara. (D) Oneide, second from the right as part of the team releasing radio tagged *Podocnemis expansa* that would reveal the species' long-distance migrations. Photo by Dick Vogt. (E) Dick signing copies of his book on Amazonian turtles. Photo by Otávio Lima. (F) Dick at CEQUA trying to order a *Podocnemis expansa* back to the lake. Photo by Otávio Lima. (G) On the day that Dick died, Matheus Moraes photographed this cloud in the form of a turtle that formed over Manaus, a fitting natural tribute to one of the region's greatest naturalists.