



VISIT TO THE 2022 TURTLE & TORTOISE PRESERVATION GROUP (TTPG) conference on captive care and breeding of turtles – **Sam Bacchini**



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Photos by Sam Bacchini, David Kelley, Vanessa Costanzo, and Russ Gurley. All photos used with permission from TTPG.

I've always been a big fan of herpetological/herpetocultural conferences. In the 1980s through to the early 1990s I was an active member of the Northern California Herpetological Society in the USA. The NCHS would host biannual conferences on keeping and breeding reptiles and amphibians in Davis, California. These conferences attracted speakers from zoos and private hobbyists from around the world including well-known keepers like David Barker (Dallas Zoo/Gladys Porter Zoo/Vida Preciosa International, Inc.), Harry Greene (professor of ecology and evolutionary biology, and Faculty Curator of Herpetology at the Cornell University Museum of Vertebrates), David Grow (former Curator at Oklahoma City Zoo and Botanical Garden), the late Tom Huff (Director of The Reptile Breeding Foundation in Canada, and credited with first coining the

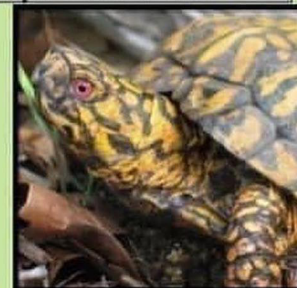
2022 Turtle and Tortoise Preservation Group



12th Annual Conference November 16th, 17th, 18th

Mesa Convention Center - Mesa, Arizona

This year's conference includes our first Wednesday field trip to the Phoenix Zoo. This fun day includes barbeque dinner at Phoenix Bakery (inside the zoo) and Zoo Lights after dinner. Presentations (Thursday and Friday) from the top turtle and tortoise keepers. Topics typically include chelonian conservation, husbandry, enclosure design, veterinary care, breeding turtles, raising offspring and more. We hope to see you this Year!



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Figure 1. Advertisement for the 2022 TTPG Conference.

term "herpetoculture"), and the late, great Bert Langerwerf (Agama International). These conferences were always great fun, very informative, and most of all very energizing. It was at these conferences where I first met Philippe de Vosjoli when he presented several talks on the care and breeding of *Ceratophrys*, *Pyxicephalus*, and other frog species, and also where he announced the formation of the American Federation of Herpetoculture, and *The Vivarium* magazine.

Years later, I became friends with Russ Gurley, founder of the Turtle and Tortoise Preservation Group (TTPG), through my interest in keeping and breeding various turtle species, and became aware of the TTPG and their annual conference. Knowing how much I enjoyed going to conferences, I was excited about the idea of attending a TTPG event. For a variety of reasons, it would be several years before I was able to make the nearly 800-mile (1,290 km) journey from Sacramento, California to Mesa, Arizona, but in November of 2022 it finally happened!

The **TTPG Conference on the Captive Care and Breeding of Turtles and Tortoises** is held each fall (typically mid-November) in Mesa, Arizona, USA, and is closely tied with the Phoenix Reptile Expo which is held at the same location on the weekend following the conference. This year the conference occurred on November 16-18, 2022.

The first day of the conference is traditionally a field trip. These field trips have included journeys to private hobbyists' breeding facilities, cactus and succulent nurseries, and visits to zoos in the area. This year the field trip was an all day visit to the Phoenix Zoo. The actual conference where the presentations occur was held on the second (Thursday) and third (Friday) days, with a banquet at lunchtime on Friday. On Saturday night, after the Phoenix Reptile Expo, there is an auction to raise funds that benefit both TTPG and USARK.

The visit to the Phoenix Zoo was facilitated by the zoo's reptile curator and we were treated to several behind-the-scenes tours of the reptile facilities, and allowed to see up close, interact with, and hand feed their collections of adult Galapagos and Aldabra tortoises. We were also taken to see their off exhibit rearing area for young Galapagos and Aldabra tortoises as well as off exhibit breeding groups of Radiated tortoises. We were then free to roam the over 100 acre zoo to see the rest of the collection of wildlife and the beautiful desert themed landscaping.

The first day ended with a catered banquet at one of the zoo's event centers where attendees were able to mingle with and get to know many fellow herpetoculture enthusiasts who were entirely new to me, or I had previously been familiar with only from books or through social media.

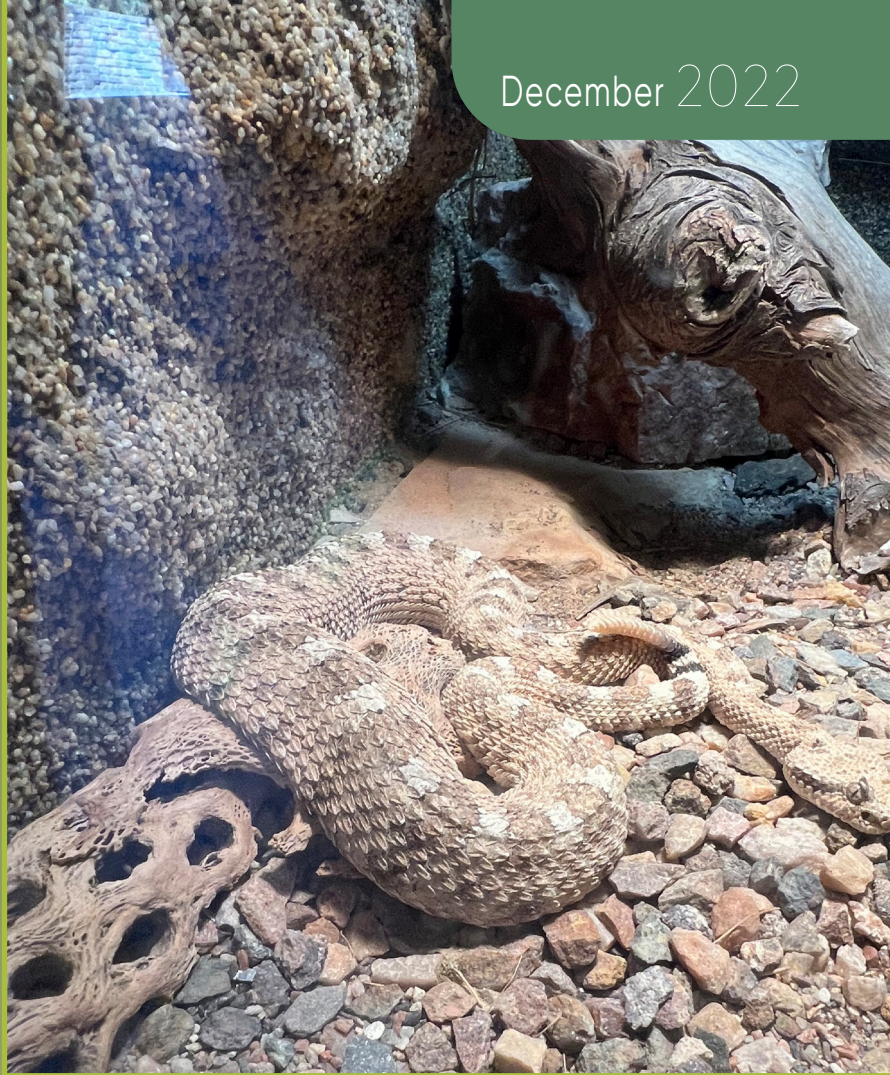


Figure 2. Sidewinder (*Crotalus cerastes* Hallowell, 1854) on display in the reptile facility.



Figure 3. Some of the reptile displays at the Phoenix Zoo.



Figure 4. Sonoran Desert landscaping at the zoo.



Figure 5. Aldabra tortoise display.



Figure 6. Off exhibit Conservation Center.



Figure 7. TTPG attendees touring the off exhibit facility.



Figure 8. Part of the off exhibit Radiated tortoise breeding group.

The Second Day of the Conference included a full day of turtle and tortoise talks beginning with a presentation by keynote speaker, Fred Caporaso, Ph.D., FIFT titled – *The Greatest Tortoise Conservation Story Ever Told!* – which began with the account of a disheartening survey of the Galapagos Islands in 1965 where it was discovered that the island's tortoise population that had been an estimated 200,000–300,000 individuals prior to the arrival of humans, was down to roughly 30,000 tortoises (mostly adults) due to human exploitation and the loss of habitat due to the introduction of non-native predators and competitors. Caporaso then described his involvement with a 60-year conservation program that has resulted in the elimination of the non-native predator and competitor species, restoration of habitat, and the captive rearing and release to the wild of 10,000 young tortoises.

Other notable talks included *And You Thought You Knew the African Spurred Tortoise?* by the renowned private herpetoculturist Richard Fife (USA) where a great deal of new and mostly unknown information was revealed about this popular species in herpetoculture, *Starting Tortoises: The First Two Months* by private herpetoculturist Mark Wilson (USA) described the techniques and importance of care of hatchling tortoises during their first two months of life, and how it can affect their health and wellbeing into adulthood, *Turtles of Singapore and Malaysia* by Ronny Bakowskie (DGHT/ Germany) who described his experiences photographing turtle and tortoise species he observed during his travels in Singapore and Malaysia, *Experiences in the Field and*



Figure 9. Young Galapagos and Aldabra tortoise rearing area. Note the movable plastic panels.



Figure 10. TTPG Founder and Director, Russ Gurley, welcoming attendees and introducing the keynote speaker.

in Captivity with the Twist-neck Turtle (Platemys platycephala Schneider, 1792) by Stephan Ettmar (Austria) who described his experiences conducting fieldwork with this species in the wild, and keeping and breeding these turtles in captivity, and *Husbandry of Russian Tortoises*

in a Cold Climate by private herpetoculturist Matthew Hills (USA) who not only described his methodologies for maintaining and breeding this species in the extreme northeastern USA, but also provided a detailed discussion of the various accepted subspecies of the Russian tortoise.

Starting Tortoises: Their First TWO Months

Figure 11. Mark Wilson's introductory slide.

During day two of the conference, TTPG also hosted the annual meeting of the Galapagos Tortoise Alliance, which is a group of private individuals and zoo personnel who maintain and manage the largest captive population of Galapagos tortoises in the world. The schedule of their talks overlapped with many of the talks in the main conference hall, so I was unfortunately not able to attend them. However, a list of the talks presented at the Galapagos Tortoise Alliance meeting is presented below.

Figure 12. Stephan Ettmar, introducing his talk on Twist-neck Turtles.



Galapagos Tortoise Alliance Presentations

- Jerry Fife (USA) – *Management and Propagation of Galapagos Tortoises, The Arizona Experience.*
- Richard Porter (USA) – *Management and Propagation of Galapagos Tortoises, The Florida Experience*
- William Espenshade (USA) – *Galapagos Tortoise Management, the Critical First Three Years from a Southern California Perspective*
- Lee Workman (USA) – *How much Humidity is Too Much? Successful Treatment of Candidiasis lesions using techniques gleaned from AIDS care – A brief case report*
- Dustin Dorton/Vanessa Sommers (USA) – *Fencing Options and Techniques for Giant Tortoises. Bonus Video: An efficient technique for field weighing tortoises that can easily be lifted*
- Mark Wilson/Brenda Stevens (USA) – *Galapagos Tortoise Management, the Critical First Three Years from a Northern California Perspective*
- Thomas Roach (USA) – *Galapagos Tortoise Management, the Critical First Three Years from a Southern California Perspective*
- Mark Wilson/Richard Porter (USA) – *Studbook Keeper's Report/ Population Management or Where we started, where we are, where we hope to go, and how we plan to get there. C. niger complex hybrids, C. microphyes, C. porter, C. vicina, and C. becki.*

*At the 2023 TTPG Conference, the Galapagos Tortoise Alliance will be joined by the Kinixys Working Group, who also plan to hold their annual meeting in conjunction with TTPG.

Day three of the conference featured an additional half day of talks that included, among others, an update on USARK and their efforts to protect the rights of herpetoculturists in the USA by USARK President and private herpetoculturist Phil Goss (USA), a talk titled *Keeping and*

Breeding Box Turtles by private herpetoculturist Jeff Kasperek (USA), *A Proposal for the Captive Breeding of Diamondback Terrapins (Malaclemys terrapin (Schoepff, 1793)) in Florida* by Daniel Parker (USA), from Sunshine Serpents, and USARK Florida. While USARK Florida addresses what are currently Florida-specific legal issues related to keeping reptiles and amphibians, any resulting legislation developed there could easily be used by agencies as a model for other parts of the country if not stopped, and finally, Stephan Ettmar (Austria) presented a talk titled *Building a Greenhouse for Turtles, Lizards, and Plants in a Temperate Climate* where he described the trials and errors and finally successes of building a greenhouse in temperate Austria.

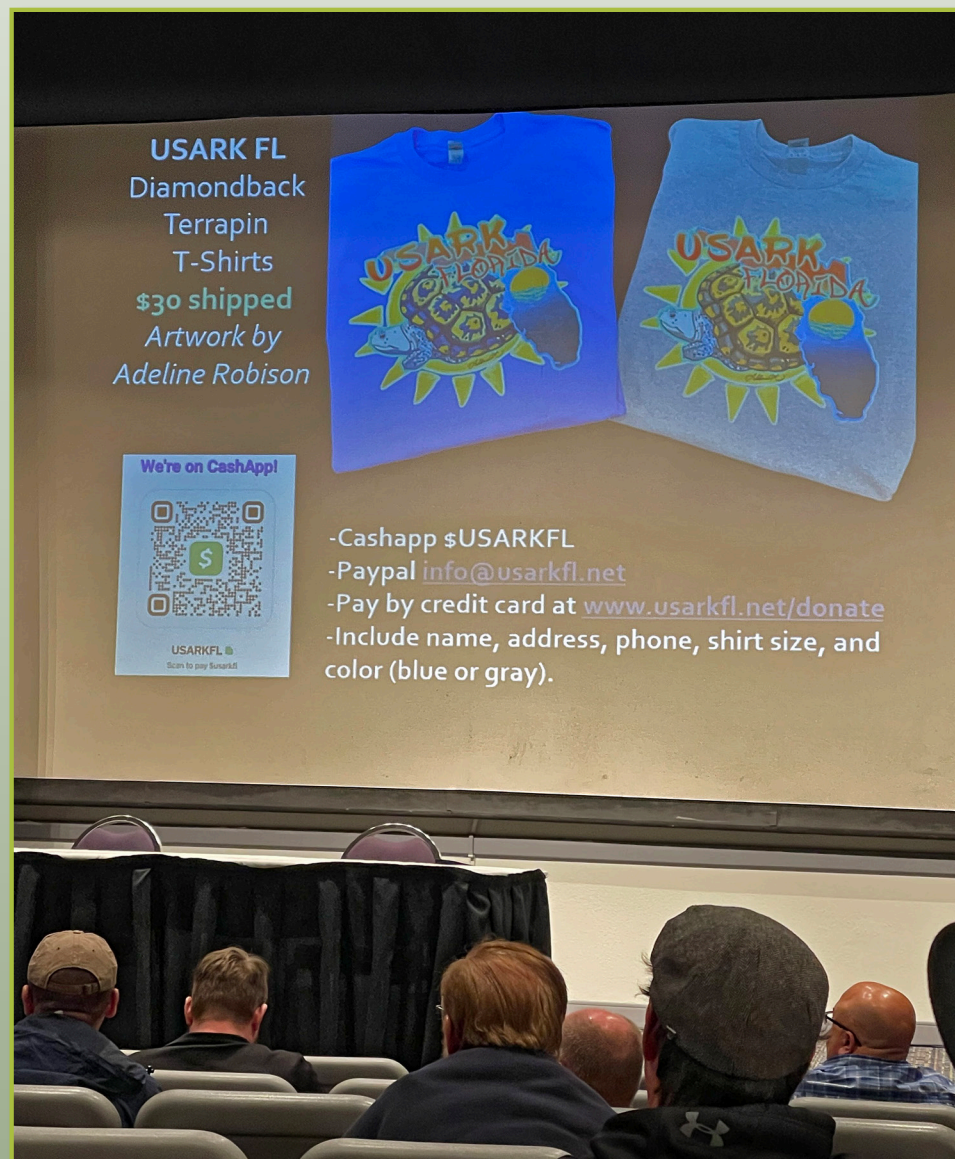


Figure 13. USARK Florida t-shirt and organization contact information.

The final day of talks wrapped up with a banquet where the speaker was artist and self-professed "turtle lover" Tony Monahan, Ph.D. (USA) who gave a talk titled *Sojourns of a Turtle Lover*. Tony presented his turtle- and nature-inspired artwork, and discussed his efforts to photograph all of the species of turtles and tortoises held in captivity throughout the country. Tony plans to expand his project to the rest of the world and to eventually publish a travel guide to all of the public turtle facilities. This was a very engaging and thought-provoking presentation.

A full list of the talks presented at the 2022 TTPG conference is provided below. While there were a few notable presentations that I highlighted above, all of the talks were impressive, well presented, and very informative.

Figure 14. An example of Tony Monahan's turtle/tortoise inspired artwork..



Figure 15. Speakers and Attendees at the 2022 TTPG Conference on Captive Care and Breeding of Turtles and Tortoises.



TTPG Presentations

- Keynote speaker Fred Caporaso Ph.D. (USA, Chapman University) - *The Greatest Tortoise Story Ever Told*
- Ronny Bakowskie (DGHT/ Germany) - *Turtles of Singapore and Malaysia*
- Mark Wilson (USA) - *Starting Tortoises: The First Two Months*
- Stephan Ettmar (Austria) - *Experiences in the Field and in Captivity with the Twist-neck Turtle (Platemys platycephala)*
- Chris Lechowicz (USA) - *Using Video Surveillance to Monitor Turtles and Tortoises*
- Matthew Hills (USA) - *Husbandry of Russian Tortoises in a Cold Climate*
- Richard Fife (USA) - *And You Thought You Knew the African Spurred Tortoise*
- Nick Burge (USA) - *Sea Turtles and Student Exploration in Costa Rica*
- Steven Sifuentes (USA) - *Keeping and Breeding Forsten's Tortoises*
- Rob Nixon (USA) - *A Monsoon of Observations on Arizona Mud Turtles (Kinosternon stejnegeri)*
- Phil Goss (USARK - USA) - *USARK Update*
- Ashley Rademacher (Zoo Med - USA) - *International Turtle and Tortoise Week Update*
- Eric Akaba (USA) - *Using Waterland Tubs for your Reptiles*
- Jeff Kasperek (USA) - *Keeping and Breeding Box Turtles*

- Daniel Parker (USARK Florida – USA) - *A Proposal for the Captive Breeding of Diamondback Terrapins (Malaclemys terrapin) in Florida*
- Stephan Ettmar (Austria) *Building a Greenhouse for Turtles, Lizards, and Plants in a Temperate Climate*
- Tony Monahan, Ph.D. (USA) - *Sojourns of a Turtle Lover*

I attended the first day of the Phoenix Reptile Expo on the day following the conference. The first day of the expo was very impressive. While I go to many reptile shows and expos that are much larger, this was a good-sized event. More impressive, however, was that it is clear the show sponsors make an effort to ensure there is a good diversity of vendors at the show, so visitors are not bombarded with table after table of the same species (as impressive as those species may be). This made it a very refreshing experience.



Figure 16. A real highlight of the show, hatchling Chaco tortoises (*Chelonoidis chilensis* (Gray, 1870)) seen at the Phoenix Reptile Expo.

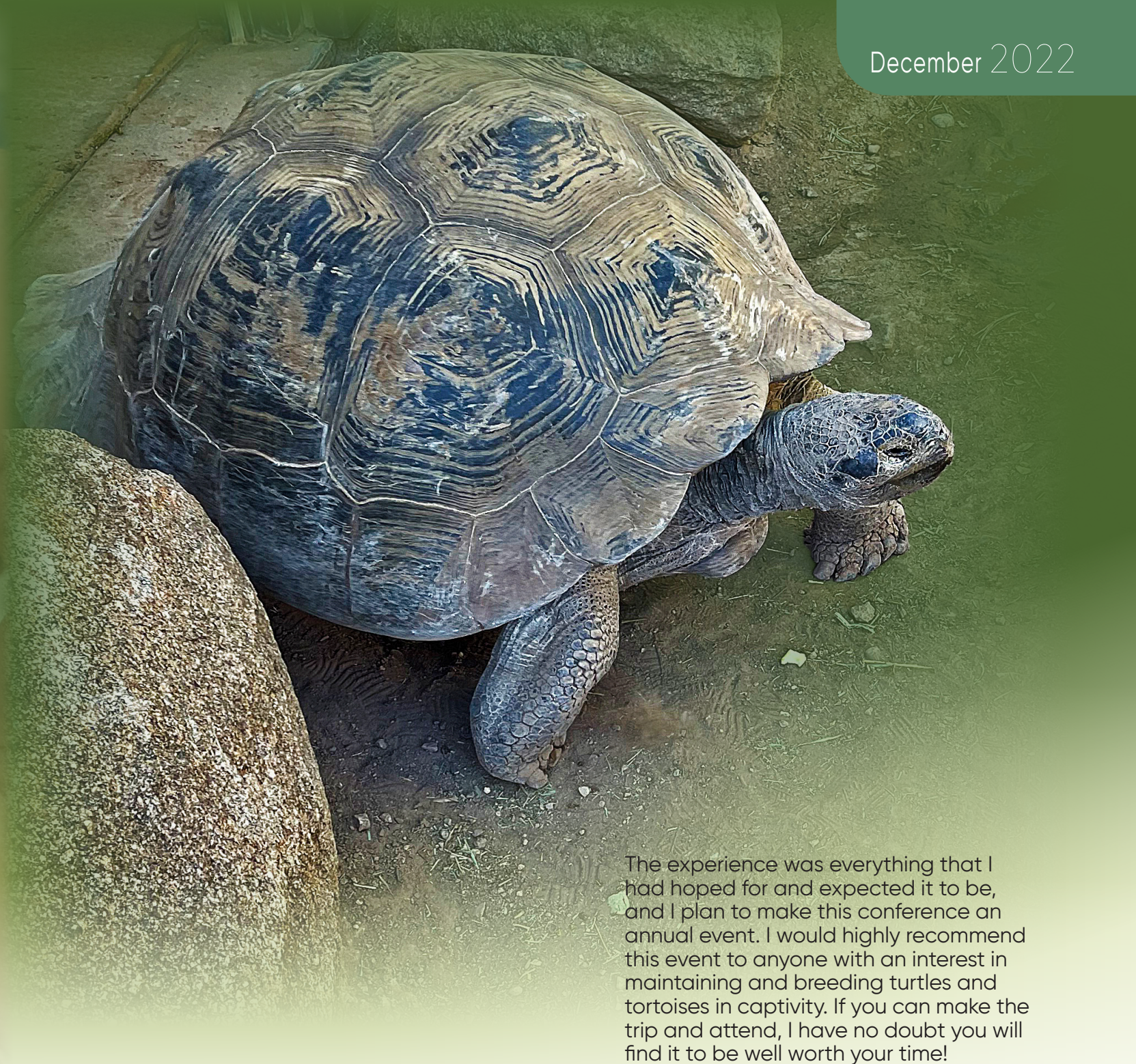
The Saturday evening auction was very well-attended, and donations included rare and unique books, original artwork, shirts, incubators, and enclosures, supplies, and a large and diverse collection of live reptiles and amphibians. Turtle breeders from around the country donated some of the most exciting and unusual species of turtles for this auction. There is no doubt that they support TTPG and its goal of conservation through captive breeding. Included were captive-produced *Erymnochelys madagascariensis* (Grandidier, 1867) (Madagascan big-headed turtles), *Batagur borneoensis* (Schlegel & Muller, 1844) (Painted river turtles), *Glyptemys insculpta* (Le Conte, 1830) (North American wood turtles), *Testudo kleinmanni* Lortet, 1883 (Egyptian tortoises), *Cuora* sp. (Asian box turtles), and more than a dozen species of lizards and snakes. The auction generated about \$40,000 for TTPG and USARK. TTPG uses their portion of the proceeds to help produce the conference, their annual journal, *The Batagur*, their peer-reviewed scientific journal, *The Batagur Monographs*, to create International Turtle & Tortoise Week™, and to fund captive breeding conservation projects around the country.

I was very happy with my first TTPG conference! I was pleased to see that TTPG has so many attendees but also supporters around the country. Individual hobbyists, small businesses, and large reptile supply corporations all donate to help keep the dreams of the TTPG board of directors alive and well. In return, they are part of a growing conservation group dedicated to preserving turtle species for the future. The talks and associated events were all very engaging and informative. The organization and flow of the event was smooth, and was designed such that there was plenty of time to socialize, to make connections, and to meet up with friends, old and new.



Figure 17. The author holding one of the hatchling Chaco tortoises seen at the Phoenix Reptile Expo.





The experience was everything that I had hoped for and expected it to be, and I plan to make this conference an annual event. I would highly recommend this event to anyone with an interest in maintaining and breeding turtles and tortoises in captivity. If you can make the trip and attend, I have no doubt you will find it to be well worth your time!

