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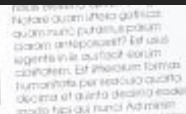
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Accusantium et nato, tunc dignissim  
aut dicitur puerum. Consectetur  
dum lectum meum est, nunc  
quoniam sterno gesticulo quoniam nunc.



Accusantium et nato, tunc dignissim  
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### About the Author

Wendee Holtcamp has covered news about conservation, wildlife and adventure travel for nearly 15 years.

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## Reptiles

### Newsflash: reptiles and invertebrates 'play'

10/25/2010



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Do Octopi play? Photo Credit NOAA.

A fascinating article, [Recess](#), in *The Scientist* by writer Jef Akst is a must-read for animal lovers. We all know that puppies and kittens - and human children, of course - play, but did you know that turtles, octopi, and even wasps may also play?

[Gordon Burghardt](#), a biopsychologist at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, defined play as "repeated behavior that is incompletely functional in the context or at the age in which it is performed and is initiated voluntarily when the animal (or person) is in a relaxed or low-stress setting."

It was a turtle in the National Zoo in Washington D.C. which led to Burghardt's initial eureka years ago. He watched the old soft-shelled turtle called Pigface batting a basketball around its watery enclosure, and wondered, could this be play? That ultimately led Burghardt to create five characteristics of play, so he could systematically determine whether various species of animals play, and under what conditions. The criteria include actions that are spontaneous or pleasurable, repeated, and only occur when an animal is stress-free. The idea of whether invertebrates and reptiles play has its share of skeptics, but Burghardt has since documented 'play' in wasps, Komodo dragons, softshell turtles, and octopi.

Pigface has since died, but you can see a new giant Pacific octopus at the National Zoo Invertebrates website batting around a ball on their [playing-octopus-cam](#). This ball has food inside, though, so perhaps in the octopuses' case, it is not play, after all.

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## Squirrels 'hide' using rattlesnake skins

09/06/2010

Highlights Magazine recently had an [article](#) by



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# Wildlife

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[Cheryl Reifsnnyder](#) about a strange behavior by ground squirrels (*Spermophilus spp.*): they chew shed rattlesnake skins and then lick their fur all over their bodies. Ground squirrels make a tasty meal for a rattlesnake (*Crotalus spp.*), so why would the squirrels do such a thing? Turns out they used the rattlesnake scent to their own advantage – and it works.

An animal behavior Ph.D. graduate student, Barbara Clucas from University of California-Davis (now a postdoc at Humboldt University-Berlin), wanted to find out whether or not the squirrels did this unusual behavior to deter predators, to ward off parasites, or to keep competitor ground squirrels away. She found that male, female, and juvenile ground squirrels applied the scent but females and young'uns did it more than males. If the males were trying to keep away their competitors, this goes in direct opposition to that hypothesis. She also found no difference in parasite load between ground squirrels that had put rattlesnake scent on, and those that didn't so that hypothesis didn't have any support either. Since juveniles are more vulnerable to predation, it makes sense that they would apply the scent more than would males. Females, too, have a role in protecting their young making them more vulnerable. In fact, adults of the ground squirrel species that Clucas worked with are actually resistant to rattlesnake venom, but the young are susceptible.

In another study she found that rattlesnakes were more attracted to ground squirrel scent alone compared with ground squirrel scent mixed with rattlesnake scent. This is a case of olfactory camouflage! The *Highlights* article includes a [cool video](#) of a squirrel applying the snakeskin scent.



*A ground squirrel applying snakeskin scent to its fur is an olfactory antipredator defense*  
Credit Barbara Clucas

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## Oil & Louisiana swamp gators

08/30/2010

On my recent trip to the Gulf Coast, writer colleague [Melissa Gaskill](#) and I stopped by St. Tammany Parish. It's called the [Northshore of Louisiana](#), because it lies on the north side of the famous Lake Pontchartrain which is north of New Orleans. It's a bucolic region, chock full of wild nature and wildlife. We went on a swamp tour and saw dozens of



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American alligators lounging on the riverbank, swimming in the water, and coming up to eat the hot dogs and marshmallows that our tour guide fed them. I am not so fond of the idea of feeding wild animals, especially marshmallows and hot dogs, but needless to say, it does allow them to get close enough to see them and shoot close-up photos.



*An American Alligator in the Honey Island Swamp of Louisiana/  
Copyright © 2010 Wendee Holtcamp*

But I digress. The reason we came here was because of concerns over how tourism is affecting the Louisiana economy, particularly related to tourism and seafood. [Dr. Wagner's Honey Island Swamp tour](#) showcased Louisiana's traditional tupelo and cypress swamps, and we spotted wading herons and egrets, lounging red-eared sliders, and lots o' gators. My favorite was the big daddy alligator – a gigantic whopper of a gator who they call El Woppo (his name is an Anglicized version of El Guapo or lady's man, but it sounds like whopper, so the Louisianans here created their own way of saying it). The 250-square mile Honey Island Swamp connects to the Gulf via inlets, and there's great concern that any storm would bring oil and tarballs into the freshwater marshes here. "The Honey Island Swamp is on the east side of the parish and vulnerable should a storm push oil in, so we're all holding our breath in this hurricane season, supposedly an active one," says Renee Kientz, Communications Director for St. Tammany Parish.

Although oil didn't initially reach the county, it had by late July when we visited. "Tar balls were found in an area called The Rigolets, at the entrance to Lake Pontchartrain," says Kientz. "St. Tammany Parish has been very aggressive in protecting the lake, however, putting up various means of blocking the oil." Some of the decline in tourism is due to the perception that oil is "all over" in Louisiana, when that is far from the truth. Oil that hits the beaches gets cleaned up promptly, although cleaning marshes is a bit more challenging. Sometimes the physical damage done to the marshes in attempting to clean them causes more problems than the oil itself. Tarballs and other oil spill byproducts may impact the sensitive flora and fauna in marshes, but they don't impact the ability of birdwatchers and nature enthusiasts to come and view the state's wildlife in most places. What the state needs, after suffering through the devastation from Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill, is people to visit and see what remains lush and wild.

"Area seafood restaurants were and are having some problems, too, because of decreased availability of Louisiana seafood and higher costs," says Kientz. But there's some good news for the region. "Because of that, and the potential for oil to make its way into the waterways and swamp at the eastern side of the parish, we were among the coastal parishes forming a new coalition that basically is working to protect tourism in the area. The organization is called the Louisiana Tourism Coastal Coalition; it was recently funded with \$5 mil from a BP grant that was given to the state."

Check out my [Honey Island Swamp Tour alligator slideshow](#) at [Adventures in Climate Change!](#)

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## 7 Ways to Help Animals Beyond Earth Day

04/19/2010

### Use reusable shopping bags instead of plastic



I bet you've seen those reusable grocery bags, and thought, hmm, should I buy one? From plain and simple ones to super-stylish bags, you have many options available. Some stores, including Target and Whole Foods, give discounts for bringing your own bag. But the best part? You're helping to save the earth. Too many marine turtles, seals, sea lions, and other wildlife get entangled in or swallow plastic bags, which causes choking, drowning, and unnecessary, tragic deaths. Plastic is so ubiquitous it has created massive [garbage patch](#) gyres in the oceans. Even if you *think* yours will end up getting recycled, sometimes they fly out of the garbage (or recycling) trucks, float in the air, into the waterways, and out to the oceans. My advice? Just buy one (or two or three), already. It will cost you a couple bucks, and it may take a few times to remember them from your car to the grocery store – but this simple step feels really good. Before long, you'll start cringing when you see other folks using so many plastic bags!

### Adopt a pet from a shelter



If you crave a new addition to your family, and you have the resources to care for the animal now and well into the future, consider adopting a dog, cat, or other animal from a local shelter. According to the [Humane Society of the United States](#) (HSUS), half of the 6-8 million cats and dogs entering shelters every year get adopted, and the rest end up euthanized. Help turn the tide the other way, so more get adopted into loving homes. And make sure fewer enter shelters in the first place: take care of your pets, and get them spayed or neutered! Check out HSUS' [Top 5 Reasons to Adopt](#).

### 'Adopt' wildlife online

Wildlife lovers around the world can help to save their favorite species by adopting one online. By paying a

small fee, you directly support the animals, their care, and conservation of their habitat. Some groups send you a plush toy, or a certificate, or information about the animal. You can adopt a cute [red panda](#) through Red Panda Network, a [whale or dolphin](#) with Whale or Dolphin Conservation Society, a [wolf](#) (and several other species) through Defenders of Wildlife or you can [Friend a Gorilla](#) in Uganda. You can adopt and follow the movements of a radio-tagged [sea turtle](#). Or if you're a Steve Irwin fan (Crikey! Who isn't?) you can adopt one of the [Australia Zoo's](#) crocs, koalas, Tasmanian devils or other critters. And Jane Goodall has a fantastic [chimp guardian sponsorship](#) program.

### Think about water



Fresh, clean water comes right out of your faucet, free and clear, right?

Not so fast. Freshwater is a precious resource. A full 98% of our blue planet's water is locked up in the oceans. Of the remaining 2% of fresh water, 1.6% is locked up in glaciers or polar ice caps (although in our warming world, these are rapidly melting into the sea). That remaining percentage of freshwater – just 0.036 percent in rivers, lakes and creeks – is precious. We require it to drink, to water crops, and for livestock. But native wildlife also need fresh water to survive and thrive. This includes land animals, most of which must drink, as well as riverine and aquatic animals. When it comes to keeping local rivers and creeks healthy (and the fish, frogs, crayfish and so on that live there), [think twice](#) about putting chemical pesticides and fertilizers on your lawn. Try natural options. Pull weeds, for example, or create a native plant xeriscape that requires less water or herbicide in the first place. Also, by using less water, it saves you money, and helps keep water flowing in the creeks and rivers, which ultimately run into estuaries at the edge of the sea – important breeding grounds for many commercially and recreationally important fish, shrimp, [oysters](#), and other species.

### Reduce your carbon footprint

Stepping lightly on the earth makes a difference in more ways than one. By turning off lights when not in use, recycling everything you can, replacing incandescent light bulbs with fluorescents, use reusable shopping bags (see above) and other simple steps to reduce your energy use, you not only save yourself money on your electric bill, you help curb global warming. The planet's warming temperature is melting glaciers in the [Himalayas](#), threatening rare wildlife such as the red panda, Himalayan black bear, and snow leopard. Warming ocean temperatures cause the bleaching of once pristine coral reefs, and cause



the oceans to acidify, threatening to turn the entire marine ecosystem topsy-turvy. And although stemming the massive impact of a warming world is going to require international cooperation and national policy action, every little bit helps.

### **Stop littering!**

Even conservation-minded folks occasionally toss orange or banana peels out their car window, not realizing that even biodegradable food attracts animals to the roadside, which leads to...roadkill (not to mention being a safety hazard. Think of all the car accidents or incidents from hitting the animals, or swerving to avoid them). And if you think throwing cigarette butts out your window is harmless, think again. Those butts are one of the most common and ubiquitous pieces of trash in the environment now – trillions of them end up as litter every year. The core is made of cellulose acetate, which can take up to ten years to decompose. Think that's not so bad? They also contain tar and all the toxins in the tobacco that the filter is there to keep from going into lungs. And where does it end up? In our waterways, which ultimately poisons the well, so to speak.

### **Go Vegetarian, even for one day a week**



As I've blogged about [before](#), the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reports that 18% of global warming gas emissions come from meat production. Tropical rainforest gets cleared in the Amazon to make room for cattle, and rainforests are notoriously challenging to replant or restore. Livestock also consumes five times as much grain as people do, which replaces natural habitat with monoculture cropland. And the conditions of factory farms have drawn much attention lately. As actress Natalie Portman wrote after reading [Eating Animals](#), "Factory farming of animals will be one of the things we look back on as a relic of a less-evolved age." Sir Paul McCartney challenges everyone to try at least one day a week without meat, Meat-free Monday, it's called across the pond, and over here we have [Meatless Monday](#). It can help improve your health too!

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## Record number of cold-stunned sea turtles

01/25/2010

When an Arctic chill swept across the south in early January, plunging temperatures below freezing for several days in a row, thousands of threatened and endangered sea turtles in Florida, Texas and other southern coastal states stranded themselves. "This is the largest cold stunning event that we have documented on the Texas coast since the [Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network](#) was established in 1980," said Donna Shaver, National Park Service sea turtle biologist, who works at [Padre Island National Seashore](#). A record 438 sea turtles stranded during just a few days of extreme cold temperatures, and more than two thirds of these washed up dead or died shortly after. More continue to come in, says Shaver. Thousands more stranded in Florida.

Volunteers and biologists alike worked around the clock to help rescue any stranded turtles that were still alive, covering them in blankets to warm them up, and bringing them into captivity to help them get back to a temperature at which they could survive. Others that didn't survive were brought in for necropsy. In Texas, a few facilities are rehabilitating rescued turtles including [ARK](#) (Animal Rescue Keep) in PortAransas, [Sea Turtle Inc](#) in South Padre Island, and the [Texas State Aquarium](#) in Corpus Christi. As soon as they're ready, they will be released back to their ocean homes. Around 75 turtles have already been released in Texas, after receiving IV fluids, steroids, or antibiotics, but others need more time to recover.



*Cynthia Rubio with two cold stunned green sea turtles that were rescued at Padre Island National Seashore/ Credit National Park Service*



The stranding occurred because the quick drop in temperature was too much for the marine turtles to handle physiologically. Their limbs stop working and unable to swim, they float to the water's surface. The lucky ones make it to shore before they die.

The vast majority of the stranded turtles in Texas were green turtles, rather than Kemp's ridleys - a critically endangered species which nest primarily in Texas and Mexico. "South Texas bays are inhabited primarily by green sea turtles and upper Texas coast bays primarily by Kemp's ridleys," explains Shaver. "It's not that the Kemp's could resist the cold, they likely left the inshore waters here before the temperatures dropped." Shaver also suggests that despite the stranding she was excited by the large number of green turtles which suggests they're making a comeback in the Gulf.

Florida's turtles suffered an even worse fate from the cold snap. Up to 5,000 sea turtles stranded there, and were rescued by workers with NASA's Kennedy Space Center and Florida's Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission – as well as volunteers – and brought into captivity. In the Sunshine State, the turtles included mostly greens, but a few Kemp's ridley, hawksbill and loggerhead turtles. Cold-stunned turtles also stranded in South and North Carolina. Fish suffered a similar fate as the turtles. In Florida alone, an estimated 53,000 fish died from the cold snap.

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## 10 Wildlife Success Stories of the Last Decade

01/11/2010

### Black-footed ferret



[Black-footed ferrets](#) (*Mustela nigripes*) live in and among colonies of black-tailed prairie dogs, their main food source. Cattle ranchers have had a long history of killing off whole colonies of prairie dogs, leading ferrets to decline as well. Listed as endangered in 1981, the black-footed ferret has now begun to rebound. Though far from fully recovered, biologists have re-established populations in several areas of the Western U.S., and as of 2008, ferrets numbered around 750 in the wild. Biologists aim for 1,500 wild ferrets by 2010. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service decided not to list the black-tailed prairie dog

as endangered in 2009, which would have been a boon to ferret recovery.

### California Condor



This all-black vulture relative with a massive wing span plummeted to functional extinction in the wild by 1987, when biologists brought the last [California condors](#) (*Gymnogyps californianus*) into captivity. It took a few years to figure out how to get condors to successfully breed in captivity, but with time, they had success. By 1991 biologists began reintroducing them, first in California and then in Arizona. California condors had declined due to several things, including DDT, lead poisoning from ingesting bullets, and persecution by cattle ranchers. Considered the most expensive reintroduction program in the U.S., the first wild condor fledged in 2003, and as of 2009 some 172 condors now live wild and free.

### Gray wolf

Once hunted to near oblivion, the [gray wolf](#) (*Canis lupus*) has recovered to the point where the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service took the species off the endangered species list last year. A 2000 court ruling allowed their return to Yellowstone National Park, and by 2009 some states had opened a hunting season on the canines. Though conservation groups aren't happy about that, a state judge has since stated that he may overturn the ruling, deeming the delisting premature. Nonetheless, the return of gray wolf populations – true symbols of the wild – to many areas of the U.S. should give us hope.

### Brown Pelican



[Brown pelicans](#) were also removed from the Endangered Species Act in 2009, another fantastic success story. Once driven to near extinction due first to hunting for their feathers and persecution by fishermen, and then in the 20th century due to effects of the chemical pesticide DDT, brown pelican numbers have rebounded throughout the coastal United States and Caribbean. Around 200,000 live in the U.S. and 450,000 live in South America.

### Bald eagle

The majestic bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) declined from a high of 300,000-500,000 animals to a low of 50 nesting pairs in the lower 48 in the 1950s, mainly due to eggshell thinning caused by the pesticide DDT. After the U.S. government banned DDT in 1972, America's national bird started to recover. The U.S. downlisted the species from endangered to threatened in 1995, and delisted them completely in 2007.

### Western Lowland Gorillas



In 2008, biologists discovered a whole new population of [Western lowland gorillas](#) in the rainforests of the Republic of Congo. Biologists from the Wildlife Conservation Society and others censused the new population at 125,000 individuals in the new population, more than doubling the known population of Western lowland gorillas, which now stands at around 175,000 to 225,000.

### Oysters rebound in Chesapeake Bay

Oyster populations have declined in the West, but have [rebounded in Chesapeake Bay](#), due to the establishment of artificial reefs. Overharvesting caused the oysters (*Crassostrea virginica*) to decline from a population high that numbered in the billions, and past efforts to restore populations had proven mostly fruitless. Artificial reefs have been very successful at bringing oysters back from the brink.

### The recovery of whales



Blue whales (*Balaenoptera musculus*) – the largest animal ever to have lived on earth – had declined 99% of their former numbers from commercial whaling through the 1960s. Once commercial whaling was banned internationally, the blue whale started to recover. More than 1,700 can be found off the Pacific coast. Northern humpbacks (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) had declined to a low of 1,200 animals but now number upwards of 8,000 individuals, not quite to the high of 125,000 in their glory days. Gray whales (*Eschrichtius robustus*), fin whales (*Balaenoptera physalus*), and bowhead whales (*Balaena mysticetus*) are counted among the whale species that have seen recovery in their numbers since commercial whaling ceased.

## Panama Amphibian Rescue

Concerned about drastic declines of frogs and other amphibians in Central America, biologists formed the [Panama Amphibian Rescue and Conservation Project](#). When the chytrid fungus Bd reaches an area, it wipes out 50% of the amphibian species there within five months. So biologists started collecting representative individuals of many species in Panama and brought them into captivity, in case they should go extinct in the wild.

## Yellowstone grizzlies



Grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos horribilis*) numbers have tripled in Yellowstone since the 1980s, recolonizing much of their former habitat. Their recovery went so well that the population was delisted from the Endangered Species Act in 2007. The National Wildlife Federation praised this as a major conservation success story though [not all conservationists agree](#). The NRDC sued the FWS to relist the grizzly and succeeded. On September 22, 2009 this population of grizzlies was relisted due to the decline of whitebark pine, the nuts of which provide a major food source for the bears.

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## New purebred Siamese crocodiles discovered

12/02/2009

In 1992, scientists declared the [Siamese crocodile](#) (*Crocodylus siamensis*) – which once lived throughout southeast Asia – functionally extinct in the wild. But then in 2000, biologists discovered a small remnant population of a couple dozen animals in southwest Cambodia. With careful protection, the critically endangered reptile has repopulated the small region until today, when they number around 250. But a finding this week brought even more hope to the cause. Scientists at Thailand's Kasetsart University tested the DNA of 69 crocodiles at the [Phnom Tamao Wildlife Rescue Centre](#) outside Phnom Penh, Cambodia just to find out if, by chance, one or two might be a purebred Siamese croc rather than a hybrid species. What luck! The [tests revealed](#) 35 of the animals were purebred, and six of them were mature adults, unrelated to one another.



*The Wildlife Rescue Team rescue a Siamese croc for transport to the Phnom Tamao Wildlife Rescue Center/  
Credit Wildlife Alliance*

That's good news for several reasons. Not only does it increase the total population size of these rare animals, but they could potentially be used to enhance the genetic diversity of captive breeding programs, and then ultimately reintroduced in the wild. The more animals exist, the greater the genetic diversity and that is always better for captive breeding programs. Several facilities hold Siamese crocodiles in Thailand and Cambodia, and some have bred them in captivity. Biologists at the Phnom Tamao Rescue Centre had planned to start a program to reintroduce crocs to get the wild population up to 500 individuals, at which point they are not considered critically endangered. The animals live up to fifteen years, so this is a long-term program, since several of the 35 purebred Siamese crocodiles are still juveniles. However the six adults can start breeding now, and biologists will introduce their offspring into various parts of Cambodia when they reach two years old.

"Unlike any other program to date, we have the potential to re-introduce, monitor and protect, breed in the wild, and multiply within 15 years without disturbance of the actual habitat," says Adam Starr, Program Director for [Fauna & Flora International](#), a nonprofit organization involved in the effort. "Keep in mind, I said potential – things don't always go according to plan."

Biologists still know virtually nothing about the Siamese croc's natural history in the wild but they do know that they live in freshwater swamps, slow-moving rivers, and some lakes, and once lived in the countries of Indonesia, Vietnam, Laos, East Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, and Brunei. They declined from hunting and habitat degradation. They can grow up to 13 feet, though most don't grow longer than 9 feet.

The Cambodian-run Phnom Tamao Wildlife Rescue Centre houses over 11,000 animals, many rescued from the pet trade, poachers, and wildlife traffickers. They house 93 species of threatened and endangered species, and reintroduce them into the wild where feasible. The Center sits on over 5,000 acres of regenerating forest. In addition to Fauna & Flora International, the rescue center works with the [Wildlife Alliance](#) - which has started a [community-based ecotourism program](#) - as well as other wildlife conservation organizations. Of the the men in the photos, Starr says, "They did an outstanding job of working together, handling the animals with the upmost of care, and collecting the DNA. It should be noted that given the amount of planning and hands-on work they have done with these animals, there was a true sense of pride and ownership of the final results from their efforts. They really are the heroes of this project (other than the purebred Siamese crocodiles themselves)."

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## Celebrate Steve Irwin Day Nov 15th!

11/13/2009

I remember vividly when I found out about the tragic death of Steve Irwin, September 4th, 2006. I'd stayed up after midnight writing but before bed, I checked the news online. Across the page I saw, "Breaking News" – Steve Irwin reported dead. I could not believe my eyes. I thought the man was invincible! I adored Irwin's infectious personality and humor, and my children and I – especially my son - loved his show [Crocodile Hunter](#). His death felt a little more personal than perhaps it otherwise would have because my two children and I had returned from a trip to Australia only two weeks earlier. During that trip, we visited Irwin's [Australia Zoo](#) and toured the Australia Zoo Wildlife Hospital where I interviewed head vet Jon Hangar - who appears in some episodes - for an article I wrote for *National Wildlife Magazine*. Irwin and his family weren't at the zoo then, but were on their very last trip together, catching crocs in far north Queensland, right before he boarded the boat from which he went snorkeling, when a stingray barb pierced his heart.



*Celebrate Steve Irwin Day November 15th! /Credit: DCL*

His widow Terri, his daughter Bindi Sue and his son Robert have chosen Nov 15th to commemorate Steve's life on [Steve Irwin Day](#). When I think of Steve Irwin, I think of the incredible passion he had towards wildlife and the way in which he excited kids who watched his shows. While his techniques were somewhat controversial among biologists and others, there's no doubt he absolutely loved animals, and he devoted much of his money as well as his entire life to helping them and encouraging that same passion in others.

The Irwins encourage people across Australia and around the world to wear khaki clothing to show their love for Irwin on the 15th - the color of the uniform Irwin almost always wore. According to the Steve Irwin Day website, "Khaki is more than a colour. It's an attitude. It's a stand to do something positive in our world and a passion to make a difference." [The Australia Zoo](#) sponsors the conservation group [Wildlife Warriors](#), established by the Irwins in 2002 to help wildlife and habitat around the world. The organization rescues wildlife during crises such as tsunamis, educates communities, conserves habitat, and researches crocodiles worldwide – one of Steve's great loves. You can even buy [Wildlife Warrior wristbands](#) through Animal Planet to support the organization and show your support.

The plight of koalas is one of Wildlife Warriors' most pressing issues. The species is listed by the government as "vulnerable" in the southeast Queensland bioregion, but are truly threatened throughout their range by two devastating diseases – koala retrovirus and Chlamydia. I wrote about the Wildlife Hospital and Hangar's passion for saving koalas in my article, [Will Urban Sprawl K.O. the Koala?](#) as he continues to honor Irwin's legacy. Some 6,000 wildlife patients come through the hospital every year, many of which are koalas hit by cars or attacked by dogs. Australia has an amazing network of volunteer wildlife ambulances and animal rehabilitators that even wake up in the dark of night to rescue car-struck animals, and bring them into hospitals such as the one at the Australia Zoo. Hangar sequenced the genome of koala retrovirus, performs surgery on koalas and other animal, and is a passionate conservationist in his own right. The Irwin family is also working hard to "[Save Steve's Place](#)" – the 330,000-acre Steve Irwin Wildlife Reserve on Queensland's Cape York peninsula, a wetland area threatened by strip mining.

To celebrate Steve Irwin Day, the Zoo has sent out into the world twelve Joey Ambassadors, young people passionate about wildlife who want to make a difference like Irwin did. They come from Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand and the USA and will try to meet challenges in the weeks leading up to Steve Irwin Day, such as gathering 15 books to donate to a school in Tanzania, getting a local school to host a Khaki Day, and raise funds for wildlife and habitat conservation. Ten year old [Jacob Danko](#) of Pennsylvania is one of those ambassadors, an animal lover and Steve Irwin fan from [Pennsylvania](#). The primary focus of Steve Irwin Day is fundraising for wildlife conservation and if you're passionate about wildlife you can [donate to Wildlife Warriors here](#).

What will you do to remember Steve on his special day? What are your favorite memories of Steve's legacy, and the Crocodile Hunter series?

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## "Mini" T. Rex found

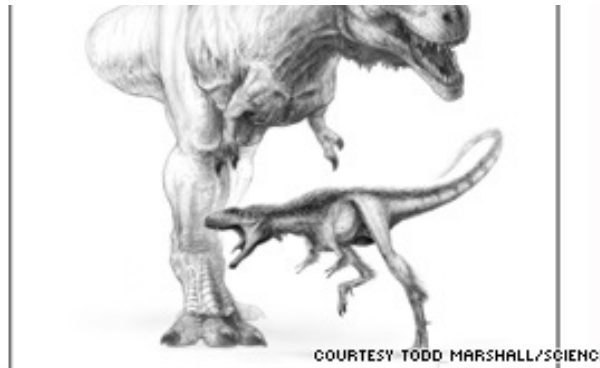
10/21/2009

We all know *Tyrannosaurus Rex* as the mother of all beasts, the terrifying five-ton carnivorous dinosaur with giant claws and formidable teeth. Now scientists have found the creature that evolved



into *T. rex*, a mere wisp of a dino compared to its larger relative. The recently discovered *Raptorex kriegsteini* stood about eight or nine feet tall and weighed around 140 pounds. Both share similar bone structure, but *Raptorex* is on a miniature scale, one 100th the size of *T. rex*. Perhaps tiny isn't quite the appropriate word, as I've seen out in the news, but compared to the gigantic *T. rex*? Definitely bite-sized.

Paleontologist [Paul Sereno](#) of the University of Chicago and his colleagues published a paper in the journal *Science*, "[Tyrannosaurid Skeletal Design First Evolved at Small Body Size](#)" in September. *Raptorex* lived 125 million years ago and is likely the direct ancestor of *T. rex*, which didn't come on the scene for another 60 million years.



*T. Rex would have towered over its ancestor, Raptorex*  
Courtesy [Todd Marshall/Science](#)

The *Raptorex* fossil was found in a single block of stone, allowing scientists to trace the fossil to the locale in Mongolia where it came from. Also, based on the bone fusion, they determined it was around five or six years old when it died, and nearly adult sized.

The finding completely threw the paleontologists for a loop because before now, it was believed that some of *T. rex*'s traits, particularly the reduced forelimbs, evolved as a consequence of its size. Since *Raptorex* had small forelimbs also, scientists know that the bone structure came first in evolutionary history. They also share a relatively large head compared to their body, specialized running feet, long legs and oversized sinus cavities, suggesting they had a good sense of smell with their larger relative. Before now, scientists believed *T. rex*'s ancestor was a theropod (aka "beast-footed" dinosaur) that had longer arms, smaller heads and non-specialized running feet. Both lived in the Mesozoic geological era that includes the Triassic, Jurassic, and Cretaceous periods.

The *Raptorex* bones were illegally excavated from Inner Mongolia, an autonomous region in northeastern China, and smuggled to the U.S. where they made their way to a fossil show in Arizona. Private fossil collector Henry Kriegstein purchased them from a vendor at the show, not knowing its significance. Kriegstein brought the bones to the attention of Sereno, who was shocked and excited about the discovery. Kriegstein donated the bones to science, and Sereno and colleagues got to work studying and learning about the dinosaur, obviously new to science. After the scientists complete their work, they plan to return the bones to a museum near where they were unearthed in Mongolia for permanent display.

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## Costa Rica's "Leatherback National Park" threatened

10/07/2009



In December 1999, I spent two weeks in Costa Rica reporting on cutting-edge research on endangered leatherback sea turtles (*Dermochelys coriacea*) for one of my first assignments for Discovery Channel. I wrote daily dispatches -before the word blog was invented - in a series called [Love & Death on Turtle Beach](#) (it no longer exists on the Discovery website, but it is archived, in part, at the 'Wayback Machine'). Today the [Las Baulas National Park](#) that I visited, established specifically to save the incredible leatherback, is under threat by Costa Rica's own government – one that is world-renowned for promoting conservation.



*An adult female leatherback comes ashore to nest at Las Baulas National Park/  
Copyright (c) Frank Paladino*

Costa Rican President Oscar Arias Sánchez -a Nobel Peace Prize winner who started the [Peace with Nature initiative](#) in the small Central American country in 2007- introduced a bill in August 2009 that would change the park's boundaries and downgrade it to a Wildlife Refuge. Environmental groups and scientists around the world have expressed outrage, even protesting on the streets of the nation's capital, San José, in August.

Las Baulas National Park opened in 1994, encompassing three beaches along the Pacific Coast where leatherbacks nest: Playa Grande, Playa Langosta, and Playa Ventanas. In the 1980s, a biologist found 100 turtles per night during the December to January nesting season. Each year that added up to 1,200 leatherbacks at Playa Grande alone, but nesting soon declined dramatically, leaving only an average of ten per night by the 1996-1997 nesting season. Today they continue to decline, though they may have turned a corner since turtles born after the park's establishment have now started returning to nest.

At sea, leatherbacks mistake plastic bags for jellyfish – their primary food source – and certain fisheries techniques often catch and kill leatherbacks on the high seas. But scientists now believe egg poaching was a main reason for their decline along the Pacific coast. Maria Koberg, the “turtle mother of Costa Rica” changed all this when she started working with Boy Scouts to patrol these beaches in the late 1980s. Education has now all but eliminated poaching in the region, but nesting adults and emerging hatchlings still get disoriented by the ever-growing lights of the nearby town of Tamarindo. Park guards are supposed to patrol the beach 24 hours a day, but often can't because budget cuts have left the park understaffed. Sea turtle biologist [Frank Paladino](#), who I met during my Costa Rica leatherback turtle expedition, says development has run rampant in the area.

Many scientists and conservation groups from around the world have [voiced concern](#) over the changes proposed for Las Baulas National Park, including [WWF's Marine Turtle Program](#), [Conservation International](#), and [Carl Safina](#), biologist and author of *Voyage of the Turtle* and *Song for the Blue Ocean*. Sea turtle

biologists say that the bill that this would weaken the protection for this endangered species whose population in the Pacific Ocean continues to decline, and send the wrong message from a country known for "green" tourism. The IUCN's [Species Survival Commission](#) commented, "[W]e believe that downgrading the status of P.N. Baulas to that of Wildlife Refuge sends the wrong message to the rest of the world regarding Costa Rica's longstanding commitment to the preservation of sea turtles and wildlife." A Costa Rican group called [La Defensoría de los Habitantes](#), appointed by the Legislative Branch to protect the rights of Costa Ricans wrote a scathing rebuke, "The bill presented by the executive branch does not take into consideration scientific or technical criteria. Changing the park's boundaries and protection level would degrade its aquifers, wetlands, and Leatherback turtle nesting areas."

A simple solution was proposed by the President of the [Leatherback Trust](#), Drexel University biology professor [Jim Spotila](#). Rather than change the park boundaries, buy them. The funds can be raised by taxing local hotels a \$1 per night and car rentals \$1 per day would raise \$10 million yearly, which could be used to pay back a \$300 million bond needed to buy the park inholdings.

And don't forget the [Great Turtle Race](#) blog post that kicked off this blog - the brainchild of these same passionate sea turtle biologists!

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