

Profile of Todd Steiner in Jewish News of Northern California

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Talking with A biologist with a soft spot for turtles

BY [DAN PINE](#) | FEBRUARY 26, 2016

Name: **Todd Steiner**

Age: **59**

City: **Forest Knolls**

Position: **Executive director, Turtle Island Restoration Network**

Website: **www.seaturtles.org**

J.: *You're director of the Turtle Island Restoration Network. What does your organization do?*

Todd Steiner: We are a marine environmental advocacy organization concentrating on endangered species. We educate and empower people to take action on behalf of the environment.

How did you get started?

We began in Nicaragua in the 1970s on a project that involved the long-term protection of the olive ridley turtle. They have mass nesting behavior, where thousands come up simultaneously to lay eggs on a stretch of beach. Biologists had explained to the local community that it was in their long-term interest not to take all the eggs, so turtles would return to nest. We hired people to work on the beach. The idea was to show the community that the resources belonged to them and they could help keep out poachers. Now it is a national wildlife refuge.



Todd Steiner and friend photo/nonie silver-seaturtles.org

You tagged a number of those turtles in order to track them. What did you learn from that?

We started getting tags back from southern Mexico. We learned there was a clandestine slaughterhouse in Oaxaca where these animals were being killed, some 50,000 to 70,000 a year. We succeeded in getting Mexico to end this slaughter and make it illegal to kill sea turtles. We then turned our attention to Japan, which killed sea turtles not for their meat but for their skin, [which was] made into leather products. We got Japan to outlaw the import of sea turtle products. Then we broadened to whales, dolphins, sharks and other species. We turned our attention to overfishing, which is emptying the seas. That's been a large part of our focus the last 25 years.

How would you rate your success?

Some of the victories were to get trap doors on fish nets, which kill the most turtles and cause the highest unwanted by-catch. There are, for example, anywhere from five to 10 pounds of by-catch for every pound of shrimp harvested. A law was passed [in 1989] in the United States that said any nation that wants to export shrimp here has to use turtle excluder devices. We were able to apply that law internationally by using the power of the marketplace. More than 20 shrimp fishing nations came into compliance. Today, some sea turtle populations are doing better, some worse, so it's a mixed bag.

You also started SPAWN, which is dedicated to saving Coho salmon in Marin, sometimes by relocating thousands of fish upstream by hand. What's the story behind that program?

I live in the watershed in West Marin, which has the largest remaining wild population of these endangered salmon left in California. I couldn't ignore it. They literally spawn in my backyard. SPAWN has grown significantly over the last 15 years. In 80 percent of the streams where they once occurred, the Coho have gone extinct. The largest population remaining is only 200 nests per year, so about 400 salmon. The official recovery plan says we need 2,600 returning fish every year for decades before they consider it recovered.

How has climate change affected your work?

It's a whammy on sea turtles because of their biology. The gender of a sea turtle is determined by temperature. Warmer temperatures create more females, colder more males. They evolved to be able to deal with temperatures. But now that we're severely impacting them at a very high rate, can the animals evolve fast enough? The answer is no. We have areas in the world where the eggs are getting too hot and not hatching at all, plus the gender balance is out of whack. And with sea level rise, beaches are the first areas that flood. Burning fossil fuels also releases large amounts of mercury that falls into the oceans and climbs the food chain. The fish we eat are much more toxic now because of this.

This is pretty depressing. How do you keep your spirits up?

I would be depressed if I weren't trying to reverse the trends. Social justice is a part of my life, part of my Jewish upbringing. I started out at the Solomon Schechter Day School in Jacksonville, Florida, and I briefly went to the Hebrew Academy in Washington, D.C. The values I learned associated with Judaism reflect who I am. Whether fighting for civil rights or fighting to protect the planet, it's all the same fight.

As a biologist you could have focused on any number of species. Why sea turtles?

When I started, sea turtles were [considered] these ugly marine reptiles nobody cared about. Now everyone I meet tells me about swimming with a sea turtle in Hawaii.

Dan Pine

Dan Pine is a contributing editor at J. He was a longtime staff writer at J. and retired as news editor in 2020.