

PROFILE

Todd Steiner

Sea turtles to salmon, Marin man makes waves

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Jim Doyle
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As a young biologist and herpetologist, Todd Steiner worked for seven years in the Everglades National Park and came close to devoting his career to research on Florida's endangered panther. Steiner, who now lives in Forest Knolls, had a passion for biology and a fascination with reptiles - he wrote his master's thesis on snake community ecology.

But he sensed that something profound was missing from his work. As an environmentalist, he knew that in pursuing scientific research, he was unlikely to have much influence on public policy.

So with few regrets, he left his job as an Everglades researcher and accompanied his wife, Dr. Lynette McLamb, to the Bay Area in 1986 for her residency at the University of California at San Francisco Medical Center. In the Bay Area, he carved out a livelihood as an activist.

"We don't need to know anything more about the Florida panthers to save them, we just need to make the hard political decisions. And those decisions aren't made by biologists," said Steiner, who works out of a former chicken coop in the San Geronimo Valley of west Marin. "I was looking for a way to mesh my biology training and activism together."

Today, the 44-year-old environmentalist is director of the Sea Turtle Restoration Project, a Marin nonprofit that has for the past decade significantly influenced public opinion and international fishing laws. He is also director of a grassroots organization that is attempting to restore Northern California's endangered coho salmon population.

As an undergraduate student at the University of Maryland, Steiner was enmeshed in social activism - taking part in protest campaigns against nuclear weapons and racism.

Soon after his arrival in San Francisco, he knocked on the door of the newly formed Earth Island Institute, a nonprofit based in a loft above a vegetarian restaurant in North Beach.

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In 1987, Steiner began volunteering at Earth Island.

"I saw it as a vehicle for doing the kind of environmental social work I wanted to do," Steiner said. "It was a way for me to tie my professional training and my activism into a goal that worked."

Earth Island hired him to run its highly successful U.S. consumer boycott of tuna caught without dolphin-safe methods. In 1989, he became Earth Island's campaign director for sea turtles. Six of the world's seven sea turtle species are endangered.

Steiner studied the sea turtles' nesting behavior: thousands of turtles converge for a few days on several beaches around the world. But he also heard reports that a slaughterhouse in Oaxaca, Mexico, was killing as many as 75,000 sea turtles a year - nearly four times the number authorized by Mexico officials.

The turtles were being killed for a small flap of skin near their shoulders and groin area to become leather in Japan.

Steiner sneaked into the slaughterhouse and took videos and photos. He and his wife (the couple have two children, Serenoa, 8, and Oscar, 13) co-authored an expose about the sea turtle industry that was published in *The Chronicle*.

Steiner scored his first big victory in 1990 when Mexico closed the slaughterhouse and ended the harvesting of any sea turtles. A year later, Japan agreed to stop importing sea turtle skins.

"The annual migrations of sea turtles can be several thousand miles. Protecting them in one spot and letting them be killed in another, doesn't save the animals," said Steiner, who next turned his attention to sea turtles drowning in shrimp nets.

Earth Island sued the U.S. government, challenging its poor implementation of a 1989 law that forbids the import of shrimp caught without devices that exclude sea turtles.

India, Pakistan, Malaysia and Thailand, who sell shrimp to the United States, challenged the law, and the World Trade Organization subsequently decreed that shipments can be blocked due to the fishing methods used, but the nations should not be penalized.

The case galvanized protesters at a WTO rally in December 1999 in Seattle, where Steiner and 200 other peaceful demonstrators dressed in sea turtle costumes.

"I think we have a democratic right as American people, and the responsibility as well, to make sure that products sold in our marketplace are not harvested in a way that destroys the marine environment," Steiner said. "We have these trade wonks, trade ministers making environmental decisions for the world."

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Wild coho salmon have become another passion for Steiner.

"I became fascinated by these organisms that are right here in the community," Steiner said. "They literally spawn in a creek that runs through my backyard."

Steiner formed the Salmon Protection and Watershed Network in 1997 when he and other San Geronimo Valley residents came to the rescue of local salmon that were unable to use a fish ladder on Lagunitas Creek because of a broken dam.

The group raised \$100,000 to lower Roy's Dam, which is located on a private golf course, and build jump pools for the salmon. More than 100 volunteers helped out during the three-year project.

There are 500 coho salmon on Lagunitas Creek, which used to have as many as 6,000 coho swim up the creek each year.

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Two years ago, the Sea Turtle Restoration Project became independent from Earth Island.

"We see our role as trying to catalyze the larger environmental organizations and getting them to take these issues on," Steiner said.

"We realize that five people in a chicken coop aren't go to save the sea turtles or salmon, but we can catalyze others to take action on behalf of the environment."

Steiner's latest crusade is the giant Pacific leatherback sea turtle, whose population has declined 95 percent since 1990.

". . . They're going extinct, just so we can eat swordfish," he said.

Steiner, whose group has filed lawsuits against Hawaiian and California long-line and gill net fisheries to protect the Pacific leatherback sea turtles, is planning an international conference at the Monterey Bay Aquarium next spring to discuss the leatherback's fight for survival.

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