

Profile of Todd Steiner, Executive Director of Turtle Island Restoration Network (TIRN)
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Everybody's got a story

AUDREY WEBB

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Everyone Has a Story

Todd Steiner has devoted his life to saving aquatic creatures. Perhaps the secret to his success is that he knows what it's like to swim upstream. The founder of the Sea Turtle Restoration Project (STRP), Steiner faces the world with an aggressive attitude and a personal philosophy that provides him with a practical sense of purpose.

"Environmentalists win battles for humanity, but overall we're losing the war," says Steiner. "But what choice do you have but to fight?"

After receiving his Masters in biology from Florida International University, Steiner studied reptiles and amphibians in Everglades National Park. In 1985, he moved to California and began volunteering with Earth Island, then in its infancy.

"When I arrived at the Earth Island office, it was a loft above a lesbian-collective vegetarian restaurant," Steiner recalls. "The entire space was smaller than Earth Island's lobby is now. At the time, Rainforest Action Network was a desk, the Environmental Project on Central America was a desk. The International Rivers Network shared a desk with IMMP. Earth Island was a desk! I walked in: within 15 minutes, they had me handling the money. That's how loose things were back then."

Shortly thereafter, Steiner was hired as director of the Dolphin Project, and was inspired to start STRP in 1989. "When you're just getting started, Earth Island provides a foundation so you don't have to go through all the administrative hassles of getting your own non-profit going. It allows you to jump right into program work," says Steiner.

In 1999, STRP left Earth Island to become independent. Steiner's team now consists of nine permanent employees, plus numerous contract employees and interns. With offices in Texas, Costa Rica, and California, STRP is an advocacy group working to ensure the rights of sea turtles are met around the globe. To do so, Steiner admits that a great deal of groundwork has to be done in the United States first. "We can't be going and telling other countries what they should be doing if we're not doing the right thing. The first thing to do is to compel the United States to take the moral high ground. Simultaneously, because we can't wait for that to happen, we have to make some headway into various international bodies that can potentially take some action," he says.

The approach Steiner and his coworkers are taking has been very successful to date. Since its inception, STRP has achieved several important goals in both the United States and abroad. With approximately 4,000 members and the collaborative support of like-minded organizations, the organization has closed two million square miles of ocean to longliners, released 40,000 endangered sea turtle hatchlings to the sea, and had an important turtle nesting beach designated as a national wildlife refuge in Nicaragua.

“Right now, we’ve taken on the challenge of trying to ban two industrial fishing technologies that are destroying the oceans - long-lining and gill netting,” says Steiner. “This is a major challenge: most of the nations of the world are involved in these two technologies. Longline fishing at this point is putting out between 2.5 and 10 billion hooks per year. And it’s taking sea turtles, dolphins, whales, sea lions, and too many fish. We’ve always seen our role as a catalyst to encourage the large national and international environmental organizations to take on these issues.”

Besides at least six working trips a year, Steiner manages to squeeze in what he makes sound like a hobby: saving salmon. The Lagunitas Creek watershed in Marin County, where the STRP office is located, is home to the largest remaining population of wild coho salmon in California. Steiner’s second project, the Salmon Protection and Watershed Network (SPAWN), works to protect the coho.

“I founded SPAWN as an antidote to the sea turtle project, which is primarily advocacy work, and it’s aggressive, and it’s litigious, and it’s fighting. The idea behind SPAWN was to give us an opportunity to do hands-on restoration projects,” says Steiner. “We’ve rescued more than 6,000 fish from streams where they would have surely died because of lack of water.”

Throughout his lifetime, Earth Island’s founder David Brower promoted what he called CPR for the planet: conservation, preservation, and restoration. Although it’s been a few years since Steiner has had a direct link with Earth Island, he continues to embrace Brower’s model, and is bound to keep making waves as he does.