

# LIVING LEGENDS OF Sea Turtle Conservation

In our field, there are leaders—icons—whose work and longevity of commitment stand out and whose impact on our common goal is outsized by any number of metrics. Each successive generation has advanced our cause, and along that continuum are influential people of all ages and from all over the world who are working in many arenas on countless topics and tasks. The following are just a few of our community's living legends.

## Chan Eng Heng



Malaysia's "Turtle Lady," Dr. Chan Eng Heng has dedicated her life to protecting sea turtles through scientific research, lobbying, education, outreach, grassroots activism, and art. She has served as a professor at the Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, where she has inspired many students over the years, some of whom now hold key turtle conservation positions in Malaysia.

In 1993, Chan initiated Malaysia's first in situ nest protection effort for the green turtles on Redang Island, a program that continues to this day thanks to the volunteer and turtle adoption schemes that she created. She lobbied passionately for the long-term protection of Redang's nesting beaches, and three new beach sanctuaries were created as a result. She also cofounded the Turtle Conservation Society of Malaysia, which remains dedicated to restoring depleted wild turtle populations through research, conservation, rehabilitation, education, and public outreach. Chan has published widely and received international awards and accolades for her turtle work. There is even a street named in her honor in Terengganu: Chan's "Turtle Alley" is adorned with dozens of mosaics designed to celebrate turtles and to build awareness for their conservation.

### What Is Your Proudest Accomplishment in Sea Turtle Conservation?

It is certainly the recovery of the green turtle nesting population in Redang Island. When I first began protecting nests on Chagar Hutang Beach, turtle nesting was sparse, with numbers barely reaching 500 nests. Today this beach hosts up to 2,000 nests per year! I am very thankful indeed to have lived to see this turnaround since I started working there some 30 years ago.

## Jacques Fretey

A lifelong herpetologist, Jacques Fretey began to focus on marine turtles thanks to encouragement from Dr. Archie Carr and Dr. Peter Pritchard while he was working in French Guiana as a researcher for the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in the late 1970s. While there, he conducted an inventory of chelonians in French Guiana and led studies of leatherbacks for

more than two decades, tagging more than 10,000 animals. He later discovered the importance of the beaches of Gabon for leatherback nesting and beaches of Long Island (Antigua and Barbuda) for hawksbill nesting.

In 1998, together with Doug Hykle, Jacques created the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) Abidjan Memorandum

of Understanding, which was signed by 23 African states. He founded sea turtle field projects in Cameroon, Gabon, Guadeloupe, Guinea, Mauritania, Mayotte, São Tomé and Príncipe, Togo, and beyond. In 2018, with the help of Patrick Triplet, Jacques drafted an important habitat resolution for the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, which is currently being considered for adoption by France and Senegal. Jacques has written or coauthored 30 books and some 230 publications about sea turtles, natural history, and conservation.

### What Is Your Proudest Accomplishment in Sea Turtle Conservation?

I'm proud of many things, such as the 10 or so French ministerial decrees and the creation of the Amana Nature Reserve (French Guiana) and the Cameroon National Marine Park, which I initiated. But my proudest and most spectacular achievement is perhaps Resolution 13.24 of the Ramsar Convention. That international resolution has taken on an importance that I never imagined. Thanks to the resolution, many sites around the world will henceforth be classified as "untouchable."



## Lily Venizelos

Lily Venizelos spent a great part of her youth on the Greek island of Hydra, where as a girl she got into trouble scaring away game birds that her father and his friends had intended to shoot. In 1974, a storm brought her yacht to shelter in Laganas Bay, Zakynthos, Greece, and she was completely enchanted by its pristine beauty. Five years later, she witnessed the invasion of bulldozers and jet skis that came with uncontrolled tourist development.

Having realized that the bay was rimmed with important nesting beaches, she vowed to fight for its protection. She was unfazed by being chased into the sea by an angry landowner's dog. Even after being throttled by a bishop, she continued to fight the good fight for the turtles of Laganas Bay. She went on to found the Mediterranean Association to Save the Sea Turtles (MEDASSET) in 1988, and MEDASSET turned itself into a fearless and effective lobbying and advocacy organization that today operates across the Mediterranean region. Her work has been honored by the United Nations and IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature), and Lily has been recognized by the International Sea Turtle Society with a Lifetime Achievement Award.

### What Is Your Proudest Accomplishment in Sea Turtle Conservation?

I'm glad to have been part of the long campaign to achieve the formation of Greece's first marine park at Zakynthos. That great, protracted, and ongoing struggle was and is a battle for protection that I have fought in the corridors of power nationally and internationally. I'm proud that what started as a localized



effort focused on one Greek island now extends to six more nesting beaches around the Mediterranean rim, thanks in part to our annual presentations to the Bern Convention. •



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