Orbituary

Michael R.K. Lambert

SEH council member Michael Lambert died on 18 July 2004 after a two-year battle with plasmacytoma. This obituary is a shortened version of one published in Applied Herpetology, the journal of which he was the founding editor.

Michael Roderick Kirkby Lambert was born in London on 3 November 1941. He was educated as a boarder at Claymore School in Dorset, an area which would have provided many herpetological opportunities. Michael remembered school as being a hard life, but acknowledged that it had provided good training for rigorous field trips later on. He then went to Trinity College, Dublin, achieving honours in botany (1965) and zoology (1966). Michael was a contemporary there of Peter Davies, later at the University of Nottingham, so that Trinity College had a notable impact in producing British herpetologists, despite the unpromising Irish fauna.

The general biology training was followed, after a brief stint as a science teacher, by a career in entomology and applied biology at the Anti-Locust Research Centre, London (1967-70) and its successors. Michael’s career came at the end of the British tradition of applied zoological work in the Empire and Commonwealth. His stimulus was undoubtedly a combination of interest in zoology, love of travel, and a desire to assist those in less advantageous situations to help themselves through agricultural development. A Ph.D. at Birkbeck College, University of London (1975) involved work on cage-bred locusts in London, and field work on plague locusts in New South Wales, attached to the CSIRO Division of Entomology, Canberra. His first three years at the Anti-Locust Research Centre involved field work monitoring grasshoppers on the River Niger, red bollworms in Malawi, and African armyworms in Tanzania, a pattern of diverse travel that was to continue. In later years Michael’s professional activities mostly involved organising and running training workshops on pest control. He was an able communicator, who was as comfortable and effective among peasant farmers as academics or administrators.

While Michael’s professional activity was entomology and pest control, his special interest was herpetology, in particular tortoises. Michael perhaps first experienced these animals in the wild on an expedition to the High Atlas mountains and the Sahara, which he led while an undergraduate. He returned to Morocco after graduation, for independent research on behalf of the World Wildlife Fund, which resulted in an important paper drawing attention to the over-exploitation of Mediterranean tortoises for the pet trade. The RSPCA subsequently sponsored Michael to make a return visit to North Africa, and this work eventually led to the banning of imports of Testudo graeca and T. hermanni into Britain. Michael wrote three major papers on the ecology and conservation of Testudo in North Africa and Turkey as a result of these field studies. At this time he also organised the Second European Chelonian Symposium in Oxford (1981), and edited and introduced its proceedings (Amphibia-Reptilia 5, 1-80, 1984).

Low population densities never deterred Michael — indeed, they were a major characteristic of his tortoise field sites. There is a great difference between studying a population where several animals may be seen each hour, compared with one where a whole day in the hot sun results (if lucky) in a single sighting. After Testudo, Michael worked on Geochelone species in various African countries, often at even lower population densities. He once told me that one per month would be a typical sighting frequency.
for *G. sulcata* in Mali, his own work there being mostly on captive specimens. Few people have the fortitude to persist at such low densities, which is one reason why Michael’s studies are of great value as an environmental record.

Michael was active in several societies, at the meetings of which he was good company and often very amusing. He was the honorary secretary and later chairman of the British Herpetological Society from 1976-1991, a member of the executive committee of the World Congress of Herpetology from 1983-93, and general secretary of the Societas Europaea Herpetologica from 1995-2004. He was also a joint founder and member since 1980 of the IUCN Species Survival Commission Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group, and a member of their African Reptile and Amphibian Specialist Group from 1993, and of several herpetological societies in Africa, Europe and the USA. He recently founded *Applied Herpetology*, Brill’s companion journal to *Amphibia-Reptilia*. The concept was launched as a poster at the Third World Congress of Herpetology in Prague in 1997, and at a plenary workshop of the Fourth World Congress of Herpetology in Sri Lanka in 2001 (Fig. 1).

Michael had a highly characteristic type of Englishness, including a love of pink Laurent Perrier and good food and music, and a strong English accent when speaking foreign languages, including French, Italian, Spanish, German and Swahili. Ulrich Joger (in litt., 29 October 2004) notes that he was distantly related to the Royal family, a connection that Michael rarely mentioned. He was sometimes irreverently but affectionately known as “Bertie Wooster” among younger *Testudo* workers, after the P.G. Wodehouse character (but not for any ineffectuality). Michael readily admitted that he was perhaps a throwback to an earlier colonial period, but was also always ready to