

Concerns on the Conservation Status of Central African Crocodilians Half a Century Ago

Dr. Dietrich Jelden

Federal Agency for Nature Conservation, Konstantinstr. 110, 53179 Bonn, Germany

Tel: 0228-8491-1310, Fax: 0228-8491-1319, e-mail: Dietrich.Jelden@bfn.de

Long before the Species Survival Commission of the IUCN-World Conservation Union, founded way back in the early 1970s, one of its first species thematic herpetological orientated specialist groups dealing with crocodilians were two outstanding worldwide known personalities - the Nobel Peace Prize winner Albert Schweitzer and the German herpetologist Heinz Wermuth - who exchanged views on the conservation status of crocodilians in Central Africa.

Professor Dr. Heinz Wermuth, one of the world's leading herpetologists and a long-standing member of the IUCN-SSC Crocodile Specialist Group, worked in the 1950s as Curator and Head of the Herpetological Section of the Zoological Museum in Berlin. Heinz Wermuth never made a secret of his favorite taxonomic groups, turtles and crocodilians, which held his main scientific interests. Furthermore, he was a strong advocate of keeping reptiles as pets, and some of his publications as well his private keeping of an amazing assemblage of live specimens of turtles and crocodilians of remarkable sizes in his rather small government flat at the Museum, document this well. Among these specimens were a common caiman (over 2.5 m long) and a 60 cm long American alligator (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Professor Heinz Wermuth with one of his pets.

In addition to his outstanding taxonomic work, Heinz Wermuth was a passionate conservationist, long before the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) came into effect in 1975. Prior to CITES and in tough negotiations Wermuth pressured the German reptile leather industry (at that time amongst the most important consumers of crocodilian skins) to unilaterally put an import moratorium on several crocodilian species whose conservation status was in decline (Jelden 2003).

His particular commitment to crocodilian conservation is also reflected in the form of his initiative in 1956 to send out a memorandum to the IUCN in Gland, Switzerland, together with three other highly reputed fellow herpetologists, urging the IUCN to take steps “to prevent the extinction of all crocodile species.” This document, also published in a German aquarium and terrarium magazine in 1956 [Aqua-Terra (Leipzig) 3: 248-250], contained 11 recommendations and was signed by P.E.P. Deraniyagala (Colombo/Sri Lanka), Frederico Medem (Bogotá, Colombia), Robert Mertens (Frankfurt/Germany), and of course the driving spirit behind it, Heinz Wermuth (Honegger 2003).

In the course of Wermuth’s 1956 IUCN initiative he also contacted Professor Albert Schweitzer, two years after the latter had received the peace Nobel Peace Prize, with a letter (Fig. 2) urging him to sign the IUCN memorandum for the conservation of crocodilians.

Besides being a physician, minister, theologian and philosopher, Albert Schweitzer was also a deeply entrenched environmentalist and animal lover. His respect for any form of life is among others well documented in his 1936 publication “The Philosophy of Civilization and from The Ethics of Reverence for Life” (Anon 2006), in which he wrote:

“A man is truly ethical only when he obeys the compulsion to help all life which he is able to assist, and shrinks from injuring anything that lives.

An absolute ethic calls for the creating of perfection in this life. It cannot be completely achieved; but that fact does not really matter. In this sense reverence for life is an absolute ethic. It makes only the maintenance and promotion of life rank as good. All destruction of and injury to life, under whatever circumstances, it condemns as evil. True, in practice we are forced to choose. At times we have to decide arbitrarily which forms of life, and even which particular individuals, we shall save, and which we shall destroy. But the principle of reverence for life is nonetheless universal and absolute.”

This kind of ethical humanitarian spirit is also well reflected in Schweitzer’s response to Wermuth when at that time he was living again in Lambarene, Afrique Equatoriale Francaise (now Gabon), on the banks of the Ogooué River. The contents of Prof. Wermuth (Fig. 2) and Albert Schweitzer’s (Fig. 3) letters are depicted below:

Dear Professor,

Your admirable support for humanity gives me the courage to ask you for the backing of a petition to be delivered to the “International Union for the Conservation of Nature (i.e. IUCN – the authors)” by availing myself of the moral weight of your personality. May I take the liberty of defining the circumstances of the matter below.

Recently, there is deplorable news from all parts of the world that the population of crocodiles, those witnesses of an era long forgotten, is diminishing following a

degrading and inhuman pursuit. For this reason, an international committee consisting of reptile researchers has been formed who have prepared a petition addressed to the "International Union for the Conservation of Nature" that warns of the imminent threat of extinction of the crocodiles. We have copied this memorandum (please find a copy attached), have translated it into three languages (German, English, French) and have forwarded it to reptile researchers all over the world in order to sign our petition. The original of the petition including the collected signatures is then supposed to be handed over to the International Authority of Nature Conservation as a plea to take beneficial measures to save the crocodiles from extinction.

Much to our pleasure, the majority of the people we have asked, i.e. roughly 130 of a total of 175 herpetologists, have agreed to our request; some gentlemen have even expressed their satisfaction for this action by writing enthusiastic letters to us. It would be quite a privilege and an invaluable support for our concerns if you, dear Professor, would also give your approval by signing the coupon you will find below on the enclosed form.

With my dearest thanks in advance,
And by expressing my reverential respect, I remain,

Yours very obediently,
Heinz Wermuth

Albert Schweitzer
Lambarene, Gabun
Französ. Äquatorial Afrika

2.1.57

Dear Doctor,

My writer's cramp does not allow me to write to you as I would like to.

You are quite right in standing up for the crocodiles. In my thoughts I will, of course, sign your appeal, but with ink, unfortunately, I cannot do so - as it is my personal policy for years not to write memoranda, not to provide recommendations of any kind, not to take over any honorary presidency and not to undersign any appeal whatsoever. For so many times I was put in the position to do just that, so therefore and at my age I only could save myself by asking for the privilege of not having to provide for something like this. So I mustn't make any exception to this rule. This between us.

Anyhow, your case doesn't need my name written on it since my mindset of the reverence of life does include all the creatures. In a report on Lambarene to my friends I wrote many years ago: "I never kill the crocodile that rests on the sandbank because there is actually no necessity for me to do so. I plead with all Blacks and Whites not to thoughtlessly hold their rifle at the animals of the forests and rivers." Should you like to refer to these lines you may use them within your own discretion.

I am sorry that I do adhere to my principles even if activities for animal protection are concerned which is a subject very close to my heart. However, there was no other way.

Here, the crocodiles are living a relatively good life. Although banished by motorboats from the great water basins they are living nearly undisturbed in the ones which flow in the sparsely populated natural forests.

With best thoughts,
Yours obediently,

Albert Schweitzer

The issue of conservation of crocodiles in francophone African countries was one of the main topics discussed at the 18th Working Meeting of the Crocodile Specialist Group in Montélimar, France (see pages 3-14, this issue). Little recent information on the conservation status of crocodiles of this part of Africa has come to the attention of conservationists around the world. However, a subregional workshop for francophone African countries scheduled for late 2007 in Niger will hopefully advance our knowledge about crocodiles in this part of the world and contribute to the conservation of these remarkable animals which would also be in the spirit of the two outstanding personalities, Heinz Wermuth and Albert Schweitzer.

Literature

Anon. <http://www.schweitzer.org/english/aseind.htm> (1 September 2006).

Honegger, R. (2003). In memory of Heinz Wermuth (1918-2002). Crocodile Specialist Group Newsletter 22(1): 27-28.

Jelden, D. (2003). In memoriam Professor Heinz Wermuth. Crocodile Specialist Group Newsletter 22(1): 26-27.

1. 11. 1956

Herrn
Prof. Dr. Albert Schweitzer
Lambarene
Französisch-Äquatorial-Afrika

Sehr verehrter Herr Professor!

Mit der Bitte

Ihr bewundernswertes Eintreten für die Sache der Menschlichkeit gibt mir den Mut, an Sie heranzutreten ~~und Sie zu bitten~~, einen Antrag an die "International Union for the Protection of Nature" durch das moralische Gewicht Ihrer Persönlichkeit zu unterstützen. Darf ich mir erlauben, Ihnen nachfolgend ~~meine Bitte näher zu erklären?~~ *Ihr Bestehen ist ein Grundpfeiler?*

In letzter Zeit mehren sich die betrüblichen Nachrichten aus allen Teilen der Welt, daß der Bestand an Krokodilen, jenen imposanten Zeugen längst vergangener Erdpochen, als Folge menschenunwürdiger Verfolgungen immer stärker zurückgeht. Aus diesem Grunde hat sich ein internationales Gremium von Reptilien-Forschern zusammengefunden und eine Denkschrift an die "International Union for the Protection of Nature" ausgearbeitet, die auf die den Krokodilen drohende Gefahr des Aussterbens hinweist. Wir haben dieses Memorandum, von dem ich Ihnen anbei eine Copie übersende, in drei Sprachen vervielfältigt (deutsch, englisch, französisch) und an alle Reptilien-Forscher in der ganzen Welt versandt, um sie um ihre Unterschrift zu unserem Ersuchen zu bitten. Das Original der Denkschrift soll schließlich zusammen mit den gesammelten Unterschriften der internationalen Naturschutz-Behörde mit der Bitte überreicht werden, wirksame Maßnahmen zu treffen, um die Krokodile vor dem Aussterben zu bewahren.

M. Wermuth
178

Zu unserer Freude hat sich der weitaus größte Teil der Angesprochenen, das heißt etwa 130 Herpetologen, mit unserem Aufruf einverstanden erklärt; einige Herren haben ihre Befriedigung über diese Aktion sogar in begeisterten Briefen zum Ausdruck gebracht. Es wäre uns eine ganz besondere Ehre und eine wertvolle Unterstützung für unser Anliegen, wenn Sie, verehrter Herr Professor, ebenfalls Ihr Einverständnis hierzu erklären und uns den unteren Abschnitt des beiliegenden Vordruckes mit Ihrer Unterschrift zusenden wollten.

Mit einem herzlichen Dank im voraus und dem Ausdruck meiner ehrfürchtigen Hochachtung verbleibe ich

Ihr Ihnen sehr ergebener

H. Wermuth

Figure 2. Letter from Prof. H. Wermuth to Prof. A. Schweitzer (1.11.1956).

D. Heinz Trenmuth Berlin N 4
zoologisches Museum. Invalidenstr. 43

Robert Schweizer
Lambarene Gabon
Französisch-äquatorial
afrika 2.1.57

Sehr geehrter Herr Doktor

mein Schreibhempel erlaubt mir nicht, Ihnen
zu schreiben, wie ich möchte. Mit Ihrem Eintreten für die Krokodile
haben Sie ganz recht. Im Geiste unterzeichne ich Ihren Aufbruch
mit der Erde kann ich es nicht. Seit Jahren nämlich habe ich
es mir zum Grundsatz machen müssen keine Toraße zu schreiben,
keine Empfehlung irgend welcher Art zu leisten, keine Ehrenprä-
sidatschaft anzunehmen, keinen Aufbruch zu unterzeichnen...
Ich kann so oft in die Lage, es tun zu sollen, das ich mich nicht
andere retten konnte, als das ich mir in meinem Alter das Privi-
legium erbat, es auch selbst nicht tun zu müssen. Da darf ich kei-
ne Ausnahme machen. Dies unter mir. Aber über beide bedarf
meines Kammers nicht. Sie & hat ja meinen Gott auch der Erlösung
vor dem Leben für sich. Damit trete ich für alle Kreatur ein.
In einem Berichte über Lambarene an meine Freunde schrieb ich vor
Jahren: „Wie hätte ich das Krokodil, das auf der Landbank schlüft,
weil ja kein Mensch ^{das} ~~an~~ ^{über} ~~an~~ ^{hört}. Alle Schwarzen und Weissen flüchten
ich an, nicht gedanklos das Gewässer auf die Tiere des Wald
und des Flusses zu richten“. Wenn Sie diese Zitate irgend
wo angeführt für gut achten, verfüge Sie nach Belieben
darüber.

(2)

Es tat mir leid, meinen Grundsatz sogar für Unternehmer des
Tierschutzes aufrecht zu erhalten, wo diese mir doch so am
Herzen liegt. Aber es ging nicht anders.

Bei uns haben es die Krokodile nach verhältnismässig gut.
Zwei sind sie durch die Matrubante aus dem grossen Wasser ab
vertrieben worden, aber in den anderen, die im dünnflüssig besiedel
ten Umland leben flüssen, haben sie fast unangefochten
mit bestem Gedeihen
zu gedeihen Albert Schweitzer

Figure 3. Prof. A. Schweitzer response to H. Wermuth (2.1.1957)



Figure 4. Envelope of Prof. A. Schweitzer's letter to H. Wermuth.