

Obituary: Eric Kowalczyk

6 February 1951 to 2 October 2020



Eric with Blueberry, the Knobbed hornbill that was under his care – an example of a lovely bond between a human and a bird.

The IUCN SSC Hornbill Specialist Group mourns the passing of Eric Kowalczyk, a champion for hornbills, focused on helping their conservation in the wild, in creating awareness and encouraging many people to do that work. It is with much sadness that we share that Eric Kowalczyk passed away on October 2, 2020. He was at his home in Seattle with his wife Sheila and surrounded by close friends.

Many of you in this group would know him and his contribution.

Eric joined the Woodland Park Zoo in 1978 and “retired” in 2017, spending most of those years working in the Conservation Aviary. Eric was devoted to animal care, especially of birds (and

most especially, hornbills), and had a long and remarkable career at the Zoo, and his work was notable for its impact on field conservation programs. He retired a few years ago from his position at the Woodland Park Zoo, but remained active and passionate in other ways for hornbills. Eric continued to volunteer for the Woodland Park Zoo’s Wildlife Conservation Division managing the Hornbill Nest Adoption program among other activities.

Eric had many interests and passions but was best known for his tireless work on behalf of Asian hornbills. For many years, he served as the SSP coordinator and studbook keeper for *Aceros* hornbills. He also built a long and fruitful partnership with noted conservationist Dr.

Pilai Poonswad to preserve hornbill habitat and promote education programs in Thailand's forests. Their path-breaking Hornbill Nest Adoption program has protected hornbills and their nesting trees, engaged with local communities, and provided supplemental income for local people living in and around the forests.

Everyone who knew Eric will remember him for his wit, his friendly nature and sense of humour and generosity. We have lost a wonderful and generous person and a strong and dedicated supporter for hornbill conservation.

Our heartfelt condolences to his wife Sheila Williamson, family and friends. Eric and Sheila had recently celebrated their 28th wedding anniversary. They had a shared love for travel and seeing new places and had been to more than 30 countries around the world.

Remembering Eric

"The flocks of hornbills roaming in the Budo mountain range of southern Thailand owe their survival in large part to the efforts of Woodland Park Zoo's Eric Kowalczyk. Heavily poached for young chicks prior to 1996, the six hornbill species: Great, Rhinoceros, Wreathed, Helmeted, Bushy-crested, and White-crowned, can now be seen throughout the Budo-Sungai Padi National Park as a result of the 24 year-long "Hornbill nest adoption" program involving villagers from 13 villages surrounding the Budo-Sungai Padi National Park working with the Hornbill Research Foundation affiliated with Mahidol University and in collaboration with other relevant government agencies.

The "Hornbill nest adoption" program is mostly funded by donations from individuals, the majority of whom live in the United States and Europe. Most of these generous donors who

have adopted hornbill nests have done so at the invitation of Eric Kowalczyk and many of them continuously renew their yearly contributions to the program. The program has effectively led villagers and their children to appreciate the beautiful hornbills in their midst, and they are steadfast in their determination to save these beautiful birds for future generations of villagers to enjoy. The program has also been upgrading natural nest cavities found in the area to lengthen their useful lives as hornbill nests, thereby increasing the rate of hornbill propagation in their natural habitat. Eric Kowalczyk has been a primary player in this project, in addition to having been an important advisor to Thailand Hornbill Project team. He will be greatly missed."

~ Dr. Woraphat Arthayukti (President), Dr. Vijak Chimchome (Secretary-General) and committee of Hornbill Research Foundation

"Eric Kowalczyk was a true naturalist who really cared about saving endangered wildlife, especially hornbills. His dedication to help Thailand Hornbill Project save the magnificent birds have been and will be memorable to all. His easy going and lively character when talking about hornbills and wildlife is a vivid memory to me. I would like to extend my condolences to his family and loved ones for his passing."

~ Dr. Anak Pattanavibool, Hornbill Research Foundation/Wildlife Conservation Society (Thailand)

"Eric had been supporting Thailand Hornbill Project's (THP) work since 1999. He had mentioned that THP had been his favourite non-governmental organisation for research, education and conservation work. He had met and known many of the field researchers and staff of THP during his visit to Thailand and at the International Hornbill Conferences, he was genuinely keen to help us conserve hornbills in

Thailand and we are very grateful. Our deepest condolences to his wife, Sheila and family. He will be forever remembered by all of us.”

~Thailand Hornbill Project team

I know that many of my friends in the zoo and conservation world and especially those in hornbill conservation will have enjoyed the company of Eric Kowalczyk. I recently heard the sad news that Eric had passed away on October 2nd. Till then he remained active on hornbill websites and kept in touch with me through e-mail. Eric was a really lovely guy who I had the privilege to know for over 20 years. Eric was committed to hornbills and focused not only on their conservation but in developing interest in young people who could take that forward. I met him at Hornbill meetings worldwide and through him we forged a partnership between Woodland Park and Chester Zoo supporting hornbill field conservation in Thailand and Sabah. I have great memories of staying with Eric and his wife Sheila Williamson at their home in Seattle. Their kindness and hospitality was exceptional. I will really miss Eric and know so many others will too.”

~ Roger Wilkinson, Formerly Conservation Project Manager/Head of Field Conservation & Research, Chester Zoo, UK.

“I first met him as a student at the 2001 International Hornbill Conference in Phuket, Thailand and ever since then he became a friend and a supporter of our hornbill work as he had been of other Asian colleagues, especially in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. We met over the years in other hornbill conferences and in Seattle where he showed me around the zoo to see his beloved *Aceros* hornbills and for dinners together with his wife Sheila. We remained in touch often over Facebook and email.

Given his interest, I requested him to be an admin of our public Facebook Group (IUCN Hornbill Specialist Group for Public Engagement) and he immediately agreed and was posting regularly for the group. We will not have someone as dedicated and interested to post on that group. He also had his own Facebook page called ‘Everything Hornbill’ where he shared news and images of hornbills from all over.”

~ Aparajita Datta, HSG Co-chair & Scientist,
Nature Conservation Foundation