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Life Preserver

Meet Harleysville native Heidi Rader—author, educator and advocate for some of the world's most vulnerable animal species *by* Walter Ault | *photography by* Alison Dunlap



Travel to a remote island paradise. Work to protect endangered animal species. Educate people about the importance of conserving the environment, both locally and globally. Write an award-winning children's book.

Heidi Rader's list of accomplishments includes all of the above but doesn't end there.

Rader, a Harleysville native, is an environmental educator, teacher and author. She also travels the globe to enlighten others about a cause that has become close to her heart—namely, the precarious situation facing the four endangered species of sea turtle (the leatherback, green, olive Ridley and hawksbill) native to the waters surrounding Bioko, a mountainous island about the size of Rhode Island in the Gulf of Guinea, just off the western coast of Africa.

In her quest to help these beleaguered marine reptiles, Rader has visited the

tropical island paradise nine times since 2006. That was the same year she wrote her thesis, "Marine Turtles on the Southern Coast of Bioko Island (Gulf of Guinea, Africa), 2001-2005," in pursuit of her master's in education and environmental sciences from Arcadia University in Glenside. She first learned about the plight of Bioko's turtles while studying at Arcadia under Gail Hearn, Ph.D., a biodiversity conservation specialist who has been working to mitigate Bioko's problems for more than 20 years.

Rader's passion for helping Bioko's troubled wildlife is fueled by a seemingly endless supply of energy. Rader currently holds a position at Drexel University in Philadelphia. She works as education and outreach coordinator for the Bioko Biodiversity Protection Program (*bioko.org*), an organization founded by Hearn in 1998; Rader joined in 2004. In addition, Rader also works as

an environmental educator at the Perkiomen Watershed Conservancy in Schwenksville, a position she has held since 2007. She works at the conservancy when she is not in Africa or working on BBPP projects.

Bioko is a fascinating place, with black sand beaches, beautiful mountains, lush rainforest and incredibly diverse wildlife, ranging from 2,000-pound turtles to 10-pound antelopes—a result of its separation from mainland Africa more than 10,000 years ago. It is without a doubt one of the most biologically significant places in all of Africa; Rader calls it "a natural treasure."

Yet Bioko also has a darker side. The island has become a destination for poachers from mainland Africa who come to exploit the turtle population, both as a food source and for their shells. "They have a law

on the books that protects the turtles," Rader says, "but it isn't enforced."

Furthermore, Bioko has a relatively dense population of 260,000 people, which puts intense pressure on the landscape and wildlife, leading to overexploitation and habitat loss. Combine this with predation from other species both on land and in the ocean, and the odds are almost overwhelming. "About one in 1,000 turtles make it to adulthood," Rader says.

Progress is being made, however. Rader recently returned from a two-day science and policy workshop on Bioko. Its purpose: to engage all stakeholders in Equatorial Guinea—civil society, policymakers, scientists, educators, nongovernmental organizations and government ministries—who are working toward the conservation of the region's natural resources in order to build a foundation for developing an evidence-driven management plan for the Gran Caldera Scientific Reserve.

"With monkeys, we count them and observe their overall health. With the turtles, we count them, tag them, examine their nests and look for signs of poaching. Of course, we also spend a lot of time brainstorming and working with the local people."

Also, dedicated research groups representing various universities and zoological societies from around the world are helping turn the tide. According to Rader, the most exciting, challenging and rewarding event for BBPP scientists and researchers is the Caldera Expedition, which takes place each January. The word caldera refers to a volcanic crater, and Bioko has a large one called Gran Caldera de Luba. Through the expedition, BBPP researchers will work to help not only Bioko's sea tur-



Heidi Rader (right), with illustrator Holly Smith

ties but also the many primate species native to the island.

"We actually camp out in the crater for a couple weeks," says Rader, who went on her first Caldera Expedition in 2006. "We study the plentiful wildlife, especially the endangered monkeys. We go in January because it is the dry season." The researchers begin their three weeks on Bioko with a visit to the beach for the turtles' nesting season, which peaks in January. "With monkeys, we count them and observe their overall health. With the turtles, we count them, tag them, examine their nests and look for signs of poaching. Of course, we also spend a lot of time brainstorming and working with the local people."

Some of Rader's fondest Bioko memories stem from 2008, when National Geographic came to the island to do a story on that year's Caldera Expedition. National Geographic "followed us everywhere," she says, "and took something like 10,000 photos." The magazine article also brought invaluable exposure to BBPP's endeavors and helped to raise awareness of the obstacles threatening the long-term survival of species living within Bioko's fragile ecosystem.

Apart from her work in biodiversity and conservation, Rader is a wife, mother and grandmother, as well as an award-winning author. In 2001, her book "Moon Over Bioko: Sea Turtles of Bioko Island," illustrated by Holly Smith, became a reality through Wildlife Conservation Publishers.

Through the dramatic story of a young native boy named Deme, "Moon Over Bioko" underscores the importance of conservation. Deme loves the island's turtles and desperately wants to help the researchers complete their surveys, which are vital to the turtles' survival. The book details the many problems the turtles face and chronicles Deme's determination to get the education he needs to reach his goal. So far, the book has earned six national and two international book awards, including a Mom's Choice Award and the 2012 Purple Dragonfly Book Award for illustration.

Rader and Smith have been collaborating on outreach programs at area schools, thereby adding yet another job to Rader's increasingly diverse résumé. The book has continued to enjoy strong sales, and this brings a smile to her face for a reason much nobler than the fact that people are reading her work: Proceeds from the sale of the book go directly to BBPP to help fund the organization's work in protecting some of Bioko's most vulnerable animal species.

The story doesn't end there. In fact, Rader and Smith have a new book in development, "Chatter in the Caldera: The Monkeys of Bioko Island," this one focusing on monkey conservation on Bioko. The new book—the second in the series—is due to be released in December. Visit biokoislandbookseries.com for more information. ■



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