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Appreciation

Dr. Fred Kurt (18.2.1939 - 6.6.2015)

By Alex Rübel and René E. Honegger

Fred Kurt was born in the Swiss town of Langenthal, the son of a hairdresser. As a five year old his mother took him to the city where the Circus Knie gave its annual guest appearance. He was fascinated by the big gray giants, bigger and more impressive than the mother-made stuffed elephant. They radiated a peace and warmth, which never let him go.

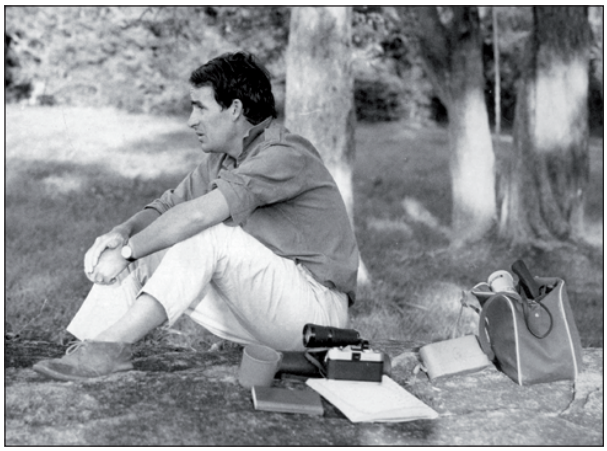
His mother had great understanding for his love for animals, and read to him from Brehm's animal life books. If he wanted to keep an animal himself, he gave it to his mother and was then able to care of it. So his room soon became a small zoo: fish, snakes, lizards and turtles moved in. He showed to his classmates how to dissect frogs. His curiosity of nature helped him early to a great knowledge of animals and soon he carried out his own research, in which he labelled toads and pursued their migration or surveyed fox burrows in the forest.

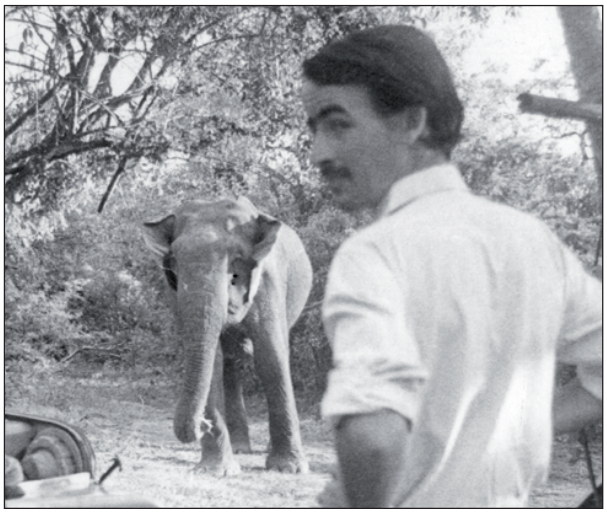
Part of the readings of this bright young lad was "Studies of the psychology and behaviour of animals in zoos and circuses" of zoo director Prof. Dr. Heini Hediger, who moved in these years from Basel to Zurich. His parents encouraged him to write to Hediger and he, impressed by the initiative of the young naturalist, helped the 17-year old to a summer job to study the dressage at Circus Knie, where he spent many nights at the elephant tent. This was followed in 1960 by his first publication on the sleep patterns of elephants "Le Sommeil des éléphants". It was not his last work in the circus. Along with Louis Knie in 1980 he wrote a book about the "Elephants and tigers at the circus".

During his studies in zoology at the University of Zurich, he got the opportunity to accompany Hans Kummer to Ethiopia for his study on Hamadryas baboons. He completed his doctoral thesis at the University of Zurich on the social behaviour of deer and due to his great knowledge became a member of the IUCN / SSC Specialist Group for deer. He wrote a number of books on the subject, in 1970 "Deer", 1977 "Wildlife of the cultural landscape" and 1991 "The deer in the cultural landscape - social behaviour and ecology of a fitter".

After graduation, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington charged him with a study on the social behaviour and the ecology of wild elephants in Sri Lanka. He lived there from 1967-1970 in the vicinity of his research site, the Ruhunu National Park. In 1970 he went on behalf of IUCN and WWF on a four-month study trip to North Sumatra. In his report on this gruelling mission he wrote: "We gave up living in tents and stayed in tabernacles. Each of us carried a weight of 10 to 16 kilograms. As food we brought only rice, tea and sugar in the jungle. This rather one-sided food we supplemented where possible with self-caught fish, tortoises, various flowers and leaves. Overall, we travelled 850 km, of which 250 km were in dug-outs the rest on foot."

Back at the University of Zurich as a lecturer, he repeatedly made excursions with the Zoological Institute and Zoological Museum or on behalf of the Smithsonian Institution, the WWF, IUCN,





UNEP, the World Bank and the Frankfurt Zoological Society, to Sri Lanka, India and Myanmar, to study elephants. From his circle of acquaintances he found interested tourists, which he led to the elephants who occasionally funded some of his research. In 1978 the IUCN / SSC Specialist Group for Asian elephants was launched, of which he was a founder. In addition, he planned reserves in Rwanda, Kashmir, Morocco and Austria.

In the eighties he increasingly dedicated himself to journalism and engaged further in elephant-studies and worked with the European Elephant Group, which publishes the serial publication "Elephants in zoo and circus", dealing in particular with the keeping of elephants in human hands. His conservation knowledge helped him to get a lectureship at the new Research Institute of Wildlife and Ecology in Vienna. In his 1982 book "Conservation-illusion and reality: On the ecology of threatened species and communities", he demanded that we move away from an emotional conservation attitude, away from pure species protection, towards greater knowledge of ecological relationships and to protect whole communities and habitats.

His main interest has always been the training of students in Sri Lanka, Switzerland and Vienna. His activities and publications have greatly contributed to increasing the knowledge about elephants and thus actively contributed to improving the keeping and conservation of elephants. Of course, he was there when Stephan Hering-Hagenbeck and Alan Roocroft founded in Hamburg the "First European Elephant Management School". He was looking for a better life for elephants in human hands. He condemned one-legged handstands of elephants in the circus as well as the brutal handling of elephants by some mahouts in Asia. Many improvements in housing conditions in Europe date back to his initiative. He was able to bring his experience comprehensively to both the elephant park in Cologne Zoo and the Kaeng Krachan Elephant Park in Zoo Zurich. Unfortunately, his idea, to carry back insights gained in Europe in working with elephants Asia and to train the local mahouts he sadly couldn't carry out anymore.

At the centre of his work are numerous publications. In addition to many journal articles, including for the magazine "Nature" by Horst Stern, are important books on elephants: 1986 "The elephant book - How Asia's last giants live", 1991 "The book of elephants", 2001 "Elephants in human hands - Research reports from Sri Lanka" and 2007 with Marion Garai "The Asian elephant in captivity - A field study".

In recent years, Fred Kurt worked hard on his latest book, which summarises his research and knowledge and which has been called best nature book in Germany: "Of Elephants and Men". The book appeared just in time for the opening of Kaeng Krachan Elephant Park in Zurich Zoo, which he helped shaping. Personally, he was a very valiant man, but he had the heart in the right place and a very good and strong humour. With the demise of Fred Kurt, we lose a great conservationist, one of the best elephant experts and a dedicated comrade and friend.

