

**Interview with Dr. Onnie Byers, Chair, Conservation Breeding Specialist Group, SSC, IUCN  
Sally Walker\***

**SRW:** Onnie, you have been involved with CBSG, the Conservation Breeding Specialist Group (IUCN, SSC) for 21 years with the iconic conservationists Dr. U. S. Seal and Dr. Robert C. Lacy as Chairs of this unique IUCN specialist group. Now you are Chair for well over a year ... so how does it feel to be at the helm?

**OB:** To tell you the truth, I try not to think about the enormous shoes I am meant to be filling. There could be no tougher act to follow than Ulie Seal and Bob Lacy! But I am thrilled to have been given the opportunity to lead CBSG. While it was intimidating to step into the role of Chair, Ulie and Bob taught me well. We have a group of superstars in our regional networks, and an amazing team at CBSG HQ — including our senior program officers, Phil Miller and Kathy Traylor-Holzer and administrative officers, Elizabeth Townsend and Emily Wick—so I was eager and excited to accept the challenge.

**SRW:** For those who do not know much about CBSG, could you give a brief description to set the stage. Perhaps you would include how CBSG is related to the world's "supermost" conservation organization, e.g. IUCN, International Union for Conservation of Nature and their Species Survival Commission.

**OB:** The Conservation Breeding Specialist Group's parent organization is IUCN, the International Union for Conservation of Nature. IUCN is based in Switzerland and is the oldest and largest global conservation organization in the world. The IUCN is made up of six commissions, one of which is the Species Survival Commission (SSC). The SSC is, in turn, comprised of over 100 Specialist Groups. Most of these are taxonomic Specialist Groups (e.g. canid, amphibian, freshwater fish). There are a few disciplinary or issue-based SGs (e.g. Wildlife Health, Reintroduction, Climate Change), one of which is CBSG.

CBSG headquarters is located in Minnesota, USA but we have 10 regional networks and 372 members around the world. Together we are dedicated to 'planning a future for wildlife'. We design and facilitate science-based species conservation planning workshops that integrate across the spectrum of management from wild to captive. To do this we develop, use and share species risk assessment and population management tools and processes.

**SRW:** Thank you. Would you describe CBSG as an ordinary organization?

**OB:** No, I would call us anything but ordinary. In fact, our organization is so unusual that we were once the focus of a study by organizational management researchers, Drs. Frances Westley and

Harrie Vredenberg. They noted as unusual our commitment to collaboration, the lean and flexible nature of the organization, and the incredible productivity of our almost entirely volunteer network. CBSG's philosophy of collaboration and empowerment stems from that of our founder, Dr. Ulie Seal. He recognized that all relevant tools and perspectives are needed if we are to solve the complex conservation problems facing this planet, and he saw everyone as a possible contributor. This extraordinary organization continues to reflect that thinking.



**Dr. Ulysses S. Seal, Chair, Captive (later Conservation) Breeding Specialist Group was Onnies' teacher, employer, colleague and friend.**



**Dr. Robert O. Lacy was CBSG Chair after Ulie's demise was friend and mentor to Onnie. These great teachers were good role models for Onnie when became next Chair.**

**\*Member, CBSG & Founder, CBSG, India and subsequently CBSG, South Asia.**



**Dr. Phil Miller, Programme Officer, CBSG and Dr. Frances Wesley, Advisor and Mentor, were close friends of CBSG.**



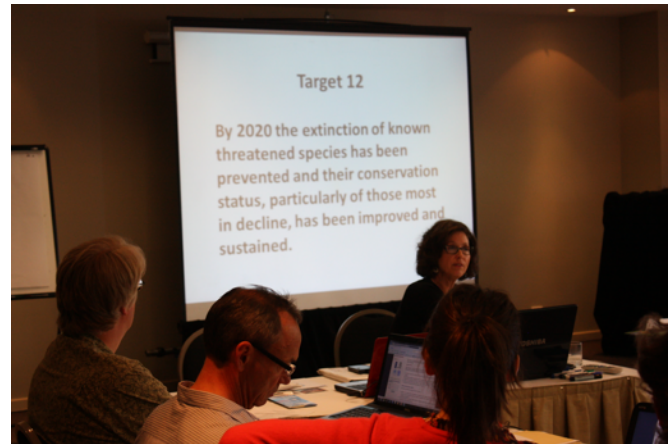
**Dr. George Rabb was also an advisor and teacher who took CBSG very seriously, ...notwithstanding these photos.**

**SRW:** Could you tell me about your most current programs?

**OB:** In addition to responding to requests for Population and Habitat Viability Assessment and species conservation planning workshops, training courses, and strategic planning workshops for conservation organizations, we have several initiatives we're working on right now. Two of the most high profile are our One Plan approach to conservation planning, and our climate change initiative, Zoos and Aquariums for 350.

The One Plan approach promotes integrated species conservation planning, which considers all populations of the species, inside and outside their natural range, under all conditions of management, engaging all responsible parties and all available resources from the very start of any species conservation planning initiative. An increasing number of threatened species are dependent on continuing management for their survival. CBSG has long held the view that, for these species, it makes little sense to conduct separate and independent conservation planning efforts based on whether these interventions take place in the wild, in increasingly managed parks and reserves, or in intensively managed zoos. We believe that the One Plan approach will help to establish new partnerships; ensure that intensively managed populations are as useful as possible to species conservation; increase

the level of trust and understanding among conservationists across all conditions of management of a species; accelerate the evolution of species planning tools; and ultimately lead species conservation towards the aspirations embodied in the Aichi Biodiversity Targets. We are thrilled that the international zoo community has enthusiastically embraced this approach and our focus now is to engage wildlife agencies as well.



**Onnie Byers leading a discussion using recent initiatives to help save the Earth.**

Another program we are extremely proud of is the global climate change movement we launched last year called Zoos and Aquariums for 350. This initiative calls on zoos, aquariums and associated conservation organizations to fulfill their conservation mission by taking action on climate change. Zoos & Aquariums for 350 connects our community to a much broader grassroots global movement, 350.org, with the same goals. If we are united with millions of others, our collective voice will be much harder to ignore by those we are asking to take leadership on climate change action: political leaders, decision makers, and the general public. In the past year, members of the CBSG community (including you, Sally) have taken action in their institutions, countries, and regions. The work of Zoos and Aquariums for 350 is just beginning and we hope many more will join us. Together, we have the opportunity to address the global crisis of climate



**Kristin Leus, Mike Jordan and Heribert Hoffer, solid CBSG members and close friends take notes on the meeting. Byers looks on from behind.**

change and the chance to tackle the problem that, if left unaddressed, will continue to undermine all of our conservation efforts.

**SRW:** "Growing up" in and having a birds eye view of CBSG, what do you feel have been the most effective additions to the Group.

**OB:** There have been so many significant milestones along the way but three come to mind immediately: the creation of CBSG regional networks, the evolution from 'Captive Breeding' to 'Conservation Breeding' Specialist Group, and the development of the PHVA process and tools.

CBSG's first regional network, CBSG India, was formed in 1990 to address the challenge of, in the words of Sally Walker, "Arming people in regions of high biodiversity to save species and populations using the tools of recovery as developed by CBSG". Following on your success, others became interested in developing networks to serve as representatives of CBSG, aware of cultural, language, political, and other considerations. Regional and National Networks are an essential component of CBSG and are critical to our ability to be effective around the globe as facilitators of conservation. We now have 10 networks playing various roles in the advancement of CBSG tools and processes around the world.

CBSG as we know it began in 1979 as the Captive Breeding Specialist Group with a focus on helping zoos maintain genetic and demographically healthy populations of threatened species. As zoos began to acquire the necessary expertise, and as species in the wild increasingly began to require the same kinds of intensive management as animals in captivity, CBSG expanded its scope to small population management and linking *in situ* and *ex situ* scientific expertise. We moved from having a focus on captive populations to incorporating a broader approach to tackling conservation problems in partner-



This was a grand night when Lena Linden received the prestigious U. S. Seal Award at a gala cookout. Left to right: Onnie, Svante (Lena's husband), Lena, Sally and Gloria.



The entire CBSG Staff (Kathy Traylor-Holzer, Elizabeth Townsend, Phil Miller, Bob Lacy, Onnie Byers and Emily Wick) at the celebration of Melbourne Zoo.

ship with zoos and non-zoo organizations. In 1994, to more fully reflect the scope of our mission and programs, we changed our name from "Captive Breeding Specialist Group" to the "Conservation Breeding Specialist Group."

Of course, we continue to evolve in response to the conditions for wildlife on our planet and the needs and expertise of our partners. As the lines between captive and wild continue to blur, our focus is increasingly directed toward integrated conservation planning and following a One Plan approach, which Kathy Traylor-Holzer and others are championing.

A major turning point came in 1985, when CBSG became involved with the recovery

program for the black-footed ferret. This effort pioneered the application of population biology methods, including computer modeling, and also the use of expertise from the zoo community to help guide recovery planning for species on the verge of extinction in the wild. This approach was further developed by CBSG and became the PHVA workshop process. The development of the VORTEX program by Bob Lacy was pivotal in moving CBSG programs forward. Frances Wesley's contributions brought facilitation and structured decision making techniques to our work. In addition, she led an effort (which Phil Miller is still actively pursuing) to explore ways in which the human dimensions of biodiversity conservation can be incorporated into the PHVA process.

**SRW:** CBSG is one of the most ethical groups that I have encountered and also one of the most hard-working. Would you describe or define those and other so.

**OB:** Thank you, Sally. It's wonderful to hear you say that. As I mentioned, CBSG's philosophy stems directly from Ulie Seal's belief in and insistence upon collaboration and empowerment. It is embedded in the culture of CBSG as an organization and in every project we take on. It is the basis of our workshop "ground rules" that we introduce at the start of every workshop: decisions are made on a consensus basis, all ideas are valid, everyone participates and no one dominates, listen to each other and treat each other with respect, assume good intent and seek common ground. We bring people together around an issue they care deeply about, often the survival of a threatened species, and we create a level playing field for discussion and provide objective analytic tools to assist with decision-making. CBSG's philosophy, our role as a neutral facilitator, and our scientific credibility create a robust, inclusive process and a product which is owned by the stakeholders and therefore has a great probability of implementation.

**SRW:** How does CBSG relate to or interact with the other IUCN SSC Specialist Groups - are the SG's more or less similar to one another? Are there ever difficulties in such a large number of similar entities as the Specialist Groups that are under TWO umbrella organisations IUCN and SSC.

**OB:** The SSC represents an incredible wealth of expertise and CBSG collaborates with many of the other SSC Specialist Groups. In the past year alone we worked with three other disciplinary groups (Wildlife Health, Invasive Species and Reintroduction) on the publication of a Wildlife Disease Risk Analysis Manual and the IUCN Disease Risk Analysis Guidelines, and with 8 taxonomic groups on species conservation planning projects.

The organizational structure and the volunteer nature of the IUCN SSC do present challenges but also provide the freedom to develop and evolve with a great deal of independence. Because of this, no two SGs are exactly alike. CBSG is one of the largest SGs and, thanks to our regional networks, we are one of the most productive. We also have the advantage of having a non-profit organization, the Global Conservation Network (GCN), with the sole purpose of supporting the work of CBSG. GCN's loyal and generous donors come almost exclusively from the zoo and aquarium community.

**SRW:** In October of this year, the Annual CBSG Annual Meeting and WAZA Conference will meet in New Delhi, India. Do you have any particular concept or vision of India you could share? Maybe I will conduct another interview of you after this

seminal conference for comparison! Just joking ... but it would be interesting to hear.

**OB:** We are honored to have our 2014 Annual Meeting hosted by CZA in New Delhi and I am personally thrilled to be making my first visit to India! As you know well, since you are responsible for it, CBSG South Asia has had a tremendous impact on zoos and on conservation in the region. We are looking forward to shining a spotlight on these achievements at this year's Annual Meeting and to bringing together zoo and field based conservation communities to address current issues of concern to the future of wildlife, both in India and globally.

One of the important topics on this year's agenda is something that you and CBSG South Asia have been addressing in your region and around the world for years, that is - the issue of substandard zoos. We will also have presentations on some of the current conservation breeding programs in India and discuss the implementation of the One Plan approach in the region. CBSG has many long-term members in South Asia and I am looking forward to meeting many of them in October.

**SRW:** We can't cover everything but is there anything more you would like to share with ZOOS' PRINT magazine readers here? Please ... carry on.

**OB:** I hope you won't mind my taking this time to thank you and your team for your dedication and commitment to CBSG and to conservation in your region. I imagine it is true there, as it is everywhere, that you often don't recognize the magic being done right in front of you. But the rest of us see the results of your incredibly hard work and are impressed by, and grateful for, it. It is my sincere hope that you and I will both have set the stage so that when it's time for us to step aside the leaders who follow us at the helm of CBSG and CBSG South Asia will be ready to accept the challenge!

**SRW:** Thank you very much for your time, generosity and patience. We look forward to CBSG in India.



**In Houston Texas...an evening at the Zoo with dinner in the aquarium. Onnie, Sonja Luz, Lesley Dickie, and Sally. The occasion was a workshop on the next World Zoo and Aquarium Conservation Strategy (WZACS).**