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Obituary - Keith Corbett MBE

Howard Inns

On 17th July 2025, the worldwide herpetological community was saddened to hear of the death of Keith Corbett at the age of 84. It is no exaggeration to say that Keith was the catalyst for real action for the conservation of amphibians and reptiles in the UK and Europe.

Keith was born and brought up in the Brighton area and developed an interest in geography and natural history that led to a life dedicated to relentless campaigning and tireless hard work for the conservation of reptiles and amphibians.

His work in the UK started to gain momentum in the late 1960s as a result of his concerns about the lack of attention being paid to the declines of our rarest species, particularly the sand lizard *Lacerta agilis* and the fact that many areas of heathland that supported the species were being destroyed. His formal field work started in 1967, initially as a University College of London PhD project. This involved field studies of sites in Surrey and Dorset, during which he built an understanding of why sand lizards were declining - lack of bare sand for egg laying and lack of habitat management. At this time, heathland continued to be lost to both residential and commercial development with no regard for wildlife, and a similar situation was also at play in the coastal sand dune systems which supported populations of natterjack toads *Epidalea calamita*. The injustice of witnessing the destruction of sites that supported populations of amphibians like the natterjack toad and of reptiles like the sand lizards lit a burning passion, sometimes a raging inferno, in Keith that was never extinguished for the whole of his active life. Keith's table thumping, at a time when the table really needed to be thumped, led to the first legal protection for the sand lizard, smooth snake *Coronella austriaca* and natterjack toad in 1975.

Keith then steered a path with collaborators such as Professor Trevor Beebee, Jonathan Webster and Mike Preston, which led to the creation of the British Herpetological Society Conservation Committee (BHSCC) in 1969. This step initiated practical habitat management for reptiles and amphibians. Keith's engaging charm coupled with an uncompromising character helped gain the respect of many heathland landowners resulting in some pioneering yet enduring partnerships that survive to this day. After a period of



unpaid employment as the BHSCC Conservation Officer, Keith was instrumental in setting up the Herpetological Conservation Trust and became HCT's first employee in 1989 as Conservation Officer, and worked hard in this role to shape the organisation and its work ethic. Keith continued in this position until he retired in 2003. In 2009, the Herpetological Conservation Trust evolved into Amphibian and Reptile Conservation (ARC), the UK's leading conservation body devoted to herpetofauna.

Keith's concerns about amphibian and reptile species also ranged into Europe. At the first congress of the Societas Europaea Herpetologica (SEH) in Vienna in 1981 he founded the Conservation Committee (CC) of the SEH, alongside European collaborators Kurt Grossenbacher from Switzerland, Richard Podloucky from Germany, and Anton Stumpel from the Netherlands. Keith was appointed as chairman because of his skill in negotiating on behalf of the species he loved. He affiliated the SEHCC to the European Reptile

and Amphibian Specialist Group of the IUCN Species Survival Commission and capitalised on the potential of the Bern Convention (Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats) for effective herp habitat conservation through the establishment of 'Biogenetic Reserves'. Later, he became active in the Council of Europe's 'Group of Experts on the Conservation of Amphibians and Reptiles' (including marine turtles), and organised field trips to remote places in Europe where the most threatened reptiles and amphibians survived. This included the presumed extinct Mallorcan midwife toad *Alytes muletensis* which Keith helped 'rediscover' in the remote gorges of the Serra de Tramuntana mountains in 1979. He edited a book on the situation in Europe in 1989 - Conservation of European Reptiles and Amphibians (Christopher Helm, London) - which to this day remains an important stake in the ground across the entire continent.

In recognition of his work in Europe, Keith received the United Nations Environmental Program Global 500 Role of Honour Award in 1991, an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Gothenburg in October 1994, and the Hungarian Government Order of Merit for Conservation in 1996. Keith was awarded the Honour of Member of the British Empire (MBE) in the 2000 New Years Honours list for services to conservation.

In 2003 Keith and his wife Cathy moved to New Zealand. During the nine years he spent there he campaigned hard for some of the overlooked species of reptiles (specifically skinks) and provided a voice to urge action for their conservation. Keith's campaigning helped provide the impetus for the publication of 'New Zealand Lizards Conservation Toolkit' by the Society for Research on Amphibians and Reptiles in New Zealand which is still in use today.

On their return to the UK Keith and Cathy settled in East Sussex and Keith immediately started campaigning for more to be done for wildlife in his local area. Keith was elected as a councillor for Newhaven Town Council where his unrelenting style helped the local planners understand the importance of treating ecological concerns seriously in planning applications.

Those who knew him will also remember that Keith was always good company, a conversationalist with great humour and a great passion for German wines, an interest he successfully combined with trips to the Rhine Valley to look for Aesculapian snakes *Zamenis longissimus* at one of only a few locations for the species in Germany. Keith was always full of enough energy to spend a whole day surveying several different sites for reptiles and continue into the early hours with night-time pond surveys for amphibians. In early 1986, Keith's determination to survey ponds late into the evening had the unexpected consequence of saving a life in the most tragic of circumstances. Whilst navigating through the undergrowth at Keston Ponds in Kent, Keith discovered the unconscious body of Dr Baksh, a GP who had suffered a brutal attack at the hands of her husband. She would not have survived without Keith raising the alarm, nor would her husband John Baksh have been prosecuted, not only for the attempted murder of his wife but also the murder of his former wife.

Keith was a conservationist who made a difference. He was passionate, articulate and never afraid to speak his mind and, during his time, fulfilled the much-needed role of putting the conservation of overlooked species well and truly on the map. Perhaps one of the best examples of that was the Judicial Challenge that he led and defended in court as a named individual (alongside Professor Trevor Beebee, both representing the BHS and the Worldwide Fund for Nature) against Bournemouth Council who had granted themselves planning permission to build houses on Canford Heath in Dorset, despite its designation as a Site of Special Scientific Interest. The Judicial Challenge resulted in Michael Heseltine, the Secretary of State, revoking planning permission for the whole of Canford Heath.

Keith Corbett was a remarkable person and the results of his campaigning have been making a difference for reptiles and amphibians for several decades, and his legacy of protecting habitats for these special species will continue to resonate for decades to come. He was much loved and we will miss him.