

Florida Wildlife Federation

67th Annual

Conservation Awards Banquet



"The Night the Barn-Owls Contemplated the Universe"

by Peter R. Gerbert

October 2, 2004

*Ramada Inn Mandarin
Jacksonville, FL*

Wildlife Conservationist of the Year

Matt Aresco



While earning his Ph.D. in biology from Florida State University, Matt Aresco has led the way in saving more than 8,000 freshwater turtles in the Tallahassee area since February 2000. Early in 2000, a pre-existing sinkhole within Lake Jackson opened up and drained the lake, causing a mass exodus of turtles and other creatures toward nearby Little Lake Jackson. However, US Hwy 27 was in the way, with a daily average of 21,500 vehicles, creating an impassible barrier to turtles and other wildlife. Hundreds of turtles were killed trying to cross the highway.

In order to prevent further mortality, Matt and his volunteer group constructed a temporary fence that directed turtles into a small culvert under the road. Matt and the group, known as Eccopassage, monitored that area at least twice a day to identify and measure the turtles, transport them across the highway and release them back into the water.

Matt and other wildlife advocates proceeded to encourage the Florida Department of Transportation to come up with a design for construction of an eccopassage to prevent further mortality of turtles and other wildlife. The DOT study will be concluded in December 2004 and an application will be made to federal transportation officials asking for assistance with design and construction of the eccopassage in 2005. In the meantime, Matt continues daily monitoring and maintenance of the temporary fences along 7,500 feet of US Hwy 27, as well as moving turtles back and forth across the highway.

Matt is also concerned with other species in need, such as the gopher tortoise and is working to have it uplisted to a "Threatened" species in Florida. He also influenced a situation regarding a proposed WalMart Supercenter very near to Lake Jackson. After he documented 25 species of reptiles, 11 amphibian species, 52 bird species and 24 mammal species at the site, there was wide publicity about the harm of expanding a WalMart development toward the slopes leading down to the lake. Facing intense public opposition, WalMart withdrew its application and is now pursuing development of a smaller store on the site.

For his extraordinary efforts to save turtles and other wildlife, the Florida Wildlife Federation is delighted to name Matt Aresco as the Wildlife Conservationist of the Year for 2004.