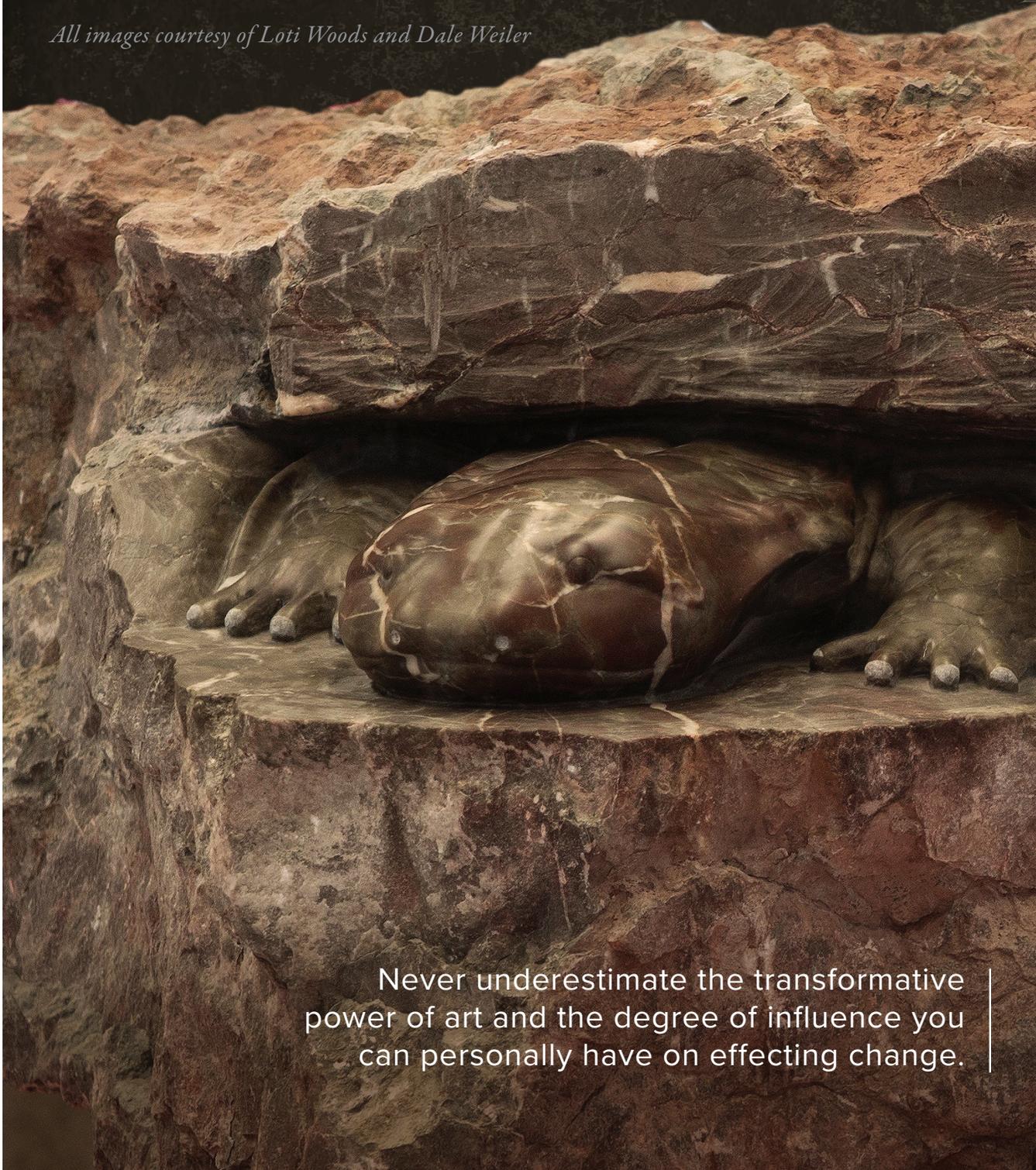


ART: A CHAMPION FOR ENDANGERED WILDLIFE

BY LOTI WOODS & DALE WEILER

All images courtesy of Loti Woods and Dale Weiler



Never underestimate the transformative power of art and the degree of influence you can personally have on effecting change.

Talk about art touching your soul! A blind woman visits the San Francisco Zoo and asks Joe Fitting, the zoo's Deputy Director, to describe a crocodile to her. Instead of telling her in words, he guides her to the zoo's sculpture garden. Joe asks her to kneel down next to a life size crocodile sculpture. She touches the croc from head to toe and then lays down on the thirteen-foot reptile weeping. She exclaims "I can finally see it, in my mind's eye." What a wonderful example of the power of art.

Have you ever noticed how many kids (and adults) can be found gathered around a sculpture at the zoo, garden, or wildlife preserve you are visiting? Why would they be so excited over a piece of art when the animal might be in front of them? For one, they can touch the sculpture or maybe even climb on it. Or under it. On one zoo visit, we climbed into a hollowed out giant tortoise shell to get a sense of how the tortoise might feel.

What a wonderful way for the public to get up close and personal and actually see the animal even if the live one is being elusive. Just like touching a crocodile sculpture and seeing it in your mind's eye.

Speaking of elusive animals, try seeing a hellbender in an aquarium. But wait, what is a hellbender? Some weird

fish? No, but way cooler. Having the distinction of being North America's largest salamander, they can reach lengths over two feet. Living in fast moving, pristine streams, they are the canaries in the coal mine of our rivers. When the hellbender population declines or disappears, it serves as a warning something may be wrong with the water quality of the stream. On a positive note, when you see a live hellbender, you know the stream is clean.

But rarely do you see hellbenders in the wild or even at nature centers or zoos since they like to hide under rocks. So how do you get to see one other than in a video or book? Through art! Now granted, there are not many hellbender sculptures around. In fact, we have only seen two.

One of these was sculpted by Dale after we both became intrigued with these beauties. After tons of research and four months of carving a 400 pound piece of alabaster, the front end of a hellbender emerged. And an interesting and unexpected thing happened during the sculpting process. We took photos of the sculpture from the very beginning as a big hunk of rock until the finished piece and posted them on social media.

The more we posted, the more people became interested in this giant salamander. We had people stopping us at the dog park asking when the sculpture would be fin-

Opposite: Hellbenders Rock (Detail) by Dale Weiler.

Below: Dale Weiler in front of his sculpture Hellbenders Rock at the Streamside exhibit at the NC Zoo.





Above: *Just Hanging* by Dale Weiler, represents one of our key conservation initiatives, bats which includes this flying fox.

Below: *Out On A Limb* by Dale Weiler, created for an Endangered Species Exhibition to bring awareness to threatened African wildlife.

ished. One woman even wanted to know how to make a donation in her husband's honor to help hellbenders. Everyone, it seemed, was learning more about these magnificent, little known amphibians.

Once it was finished, we asked ourselves: now what do we do with it? Putting the sculpture in our living room was really not a viable option. Although we did consider it! But no, we wanted to find a public venue where both children and adults could learn more about these animals and the need to keep our streams clean in order to help them survive and thrive.

Since we had already partnered with the NC Zoo on some amphibian conservation initiatives and they had a small hellbender exhibit, we began a dialogue with them on the sculpture. What was so unexpected was the reaction of the zoo's curators, zookeepers, and exhibit builders. They all came together and lobbied the Executive Director, Pat Simmons, for a bigger, better hellbender/native fish exhibit with Dale's sculpture as the centerpiece. It was so inspiring to watch their creativity, passion, and ideas flow on how to create a more effective (and impactful) public, visual learning experience for hellbenders and their aquatic neighbors.

And sure enough, kids and adults can now touch Dale's sculpture in front of the exhibit, watch a video about





Just Settling In by Dale Weiler, a sculpture of a red wolf and her pup. On loan to Arkansas State University.

hellbenders, use a touch screen to learn more about salamanders, and watch the hellbenders (if you can find one) and the native fish swim in a brighter, more expansive aquarium.

The floor of the exhibit was even painted to mimic a riverbed with lights sparkling over it, giving the visitor the impression you are walking through a stream. Art can inspire in unexpected ways. Even we couldn't have predicted this outcome! Now thousands of visitors can learn about hellbenders by seeing the revamped exhibit. And the icing on the cake? A handwritten note from Pat Simmons saying, "thank you for rallying the troops and thank you for being a part of our zoo family. We love you!"

One of the key lessons we have learned is to be ready for anything that presents itself. While at the NC Zoo for the hellbender sculpture unveiling, we got to meet three red wolves. And not any red wolves, but three eight-week old pups. It was love at first sight. How could these little ones not tug at our heartstrings!

We subsequently learned red wolves are the soul carnivores indigenous exclusively to the US. But wait there's more. The only wild pack in existence in the world resides right here in our home state of North Carolina. At the time, there were only twenty believed to be left in the wild. Today that number is estimated to be twelve. We knew we had to do something to help save them.

Dale couldn't wait to find a red wolf in his stone pile as soon as we got home from the zoo. Sure enough he was able to see a mom and her pup in a piece of alabaster he had been saving for years. Until he saw the red wolves at the zoo, he was never quite sure what animal resided inside the stone. Suddenly it was revealed and even the stone coloration was a perfect match for the red wolf. Fast-forward five months of working on the piece and we were ready to see how we could use it to generate a buzz about these underdogs.

And if you haven't noticed a trend here, we tend to focus on the misunderstood animals and plants that we lov-

ingly call the underdogs. There are so many false myths surrounding wolves, and red wolves always seem to be associated with Little Red Riding Hood (and not in a good way)!

People still think red wolves will eat your grandmother and maybe your children, when, in fact, there has never been a documented red wolf attack on a person. Red wolves are shy, mate for life, and are great parents. Plus, as apex predators, they keep our ecosystem in balance and even help keep coyote populations in check.

One of our goals is to help dispel the myths surrounding these critically endangered canids. This article, in fact, is a direct result of a comment we responded to about wolves in an editorial in *Sculpture Review*, but we will save those details for another story.

So now we have this sculpture, how can we use it to bring positive awareness about these shy animals on the brink of extinction? We contacted two organizations heavily committed to red wolf conservation to brainstorm possibilities: Defenders of Wildlife and the North Carolina Zoo. We all knew we wanted to find ways to reach as many people as possible with Dale's sculpture. Collectively we came up with some intriguing ways to use the artwork.

The first order of business was finding a home for the original sculpture. Some calls were made and an agree-

ment was reached with Arkansas State University in Jonesboro, AR to loan the sculpture to them for two years. And their mascot? You got it, the red wolf!

The university is not only deeply committed to furthering public awareness about and rewilding red wolves, but requires all incoming freshman to take an educational course about them. We have been so impressed with all the people we met at AState, we've just funded a scholarship program for biology students called the Weiler Woods Red Wolf Conservation Scholarship: a brand new way for us to help conservation. And all of this started with a red wolf sculpture.

To expand the outreach for the sculpture even further we created hand-painted cement castings from the stone original and made them available to facilities across the US that are actively pursuing red wolf conservation programs. The castings are being used to improve public education and awareness of red wolves.

We have been overwhelmed with how well the artwork has been received. To date, we've donated ten castings and are planning a second (and last) run of casting this spring. Places like Zoo Knoxville, the NC Zoo, the WNC Nature Center, the Reflection Riding Arboretum & Nature Center in TN, the Wolf Conservation Center in NY, and the Endangered Wolf Center in MO all have castings that are helping spread the message.

Dale Weiler & Loti Woods at the unveiling of a limited edition casting of Dale's sculpture *Just Settling In* at The Red Wolf Education Center at Alligator River Wildlife Refuge.





A koala bear with her joey by Nick Mackman. All proceeds were donated to the World Wildlife Fund Australia to help wildlife injured by the Australian wildfires.



Above: *Northern Flying Squirrel* by David Turner to benefit the Virginia Nongame & Endangered Species Program.

Below: *Bayou Phantom* by Dale Weiler, depicts an ivory-billed woodpecker, quite possibly now extinct.



Expanding on our earlier comment about always being ready to take advantage of opportunities as they present themselves, who would think having some Girl Scouts over for a studio tour could change your life. Working on their outdoor badge, the scouts wanted to see what a wildlife artist does in her/his studio. How could we say no when one of the mothers called to see if they could visit? When they arrived, Dale was working on the red wolf sculpture.

The minute the girls saw the sculpture, they peppered us with questions. What kind of animal was being sculpted? Where did the wolves live? How old was the baby? Once we told them the story of the red wolves and how few are left in the wild, they were hooked. After a quick huddle and a lot of whispering, the girls announced they wanted to donate their fall fundraising project to help red wolf recovery. We were overjoyed to see how art could touch young people in such an immediate way.

And jumping forward a year, the girls now want to dedicate their upcoming service project to helping the community and their school peers learn how to save and protect red wolves. Through this experience, our convictions are even stronger about how art can inspire a child or an adult to take action.

And what about other ways to use art to help wildlife and habitat? We are certainly not alone in using art to help conservation causes around the world.

If you have ever seen Nick Mackman's animal sculptures (in Devon, England), you probably love them as much as we do. They are playful, expressive, and often used to raise money for conservation. Working in both ceramic and bronze, she won the David Shepard Wildlife Foundation Wildlife Artist of the Year competition in 2015.

Looking for a way to help wildlife affected by the recent Australian brushfires, Nick decided to sculpt a koala bear and her joey (baby) to raise money for injured animals. Never having carved a koala, she had to do a lot of research to sculpt this cute, iconic species, which has been one of the hardest hit by the fires.

Partnering with the World Wildlife Fund (Australia) and Just Giving, an organization that has raised over \$4.5 billion in donations to global charities, Nick offered one

Contemplation by Bart Walter at The National Geographic Society for an exhibit on the extraordinary life of Jane Goodall.



lucky donor the opportunity to win the koala sculpture. All you had to do was make a donation with the money going directly to World Wildlife Fund. A very cool way to raise money, help a specific species, and give back.

David Turner (NSS) with Turner Sculpture in Onley, VA has found another creative way to make a difference in wildlife conservation using his art. David has created four bronzes in his Endangered Species Series to raise money for Virginia's wildlife. A Northern flying squirrel, the rare Bewick's wren, a piping plover mom with her baby chicks, and a northern saw-whet owl have all been cast in limited editions of 200.

Part of the purchase price covers the casting costs, with the remainder going to the Virginia Nongame and the Endangered Species Program, which manages all endangered wildlife in Virginia. So far, Turner Sculpture has raised over \$100,000, which covers one-tenth of this program's operating budget. A huge win for wildlife.

Another true champion of wildlife conservation causes around the globe is Bart Walter (NSS), a bronze wildlife sculptor who has been on the forefront of primate conservation. It all started over thirty years ago when he met Jane Goodall, the world's foremost expert on chimpanzees and one of our personal conservation heroes. Jane asked him to sculpt one of her beloved chimpanzees and went on to use several of Bart's sculptures as awards for outstanding conservationists. Over the years, he has made seventeen different life-size chimpanzee sculptures, with many touring the country to help raise awareness for the need to help protect these endangered great apes.

One other rather unique approach Bart has been using to promote the well being of our wildlife and their habitat is the simple act of loaning a sculpture to an organiza-

tion. He has loaned a number of bronzes to the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF) for their DC headquarters. A triple win: the artist has their work on public display, the organization gets free use of the sculpture to promote awareness, and visitors are rewarded with beautiful art. And in Bart's case, his relationship with AWF deepened to the point they purchased one of his mountain gorilla sculptures as a gift for the people of Uganda.

We have only scratched the surface here on creative ways to use art to educate, inspire, and initiate public involvement in protecting endangered wildlife and habitat around the world. We'd love to hear from other artists about how they are using their art to make a difference.

As we continue to search out new partners to help endangered wildlife, especially those misunderstood and underappreciated species, we are continually amazed by the passionate people we meet. By brainstorming with our conservation partners and other artists, we're finding new and imaginative ways to use our art.

And recognizing that habitat preservation goes hand-in-hand with wildlife conservation, we seek out projects and folks that help both. If you are an artist, we hope you will join us in finding creative ways to make a difference for the health of our planet using your individual form of art. You have an opportunity of applying your unique talents to help folks fall in love with and take action to protect our natural world. Never underestimate the transformative power of art and the degree of influence you can personally have on effecting change.

Our personal experiences have taught us that any action, no matter how small it might feel, can have a major impact. Using art is a very powerful way to make a positive difference. ●

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