



As an undercover agent, Ken McCloud gave animal smugglers a run for their money

BY JOHN MOIR/ PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIMOTHY ARCHIBALD

Ken McCloud's nerves were on edge.

It was late on an August evening, and McCloud had driven to a cinder-block warehouse on an unlit back street in Batesburg, S.C. He took a breath, stepped from the car, and slung over his shoulder a carry-on bag containing \$9,000 in \$100 bills. He'd slipped an eight-inch knife into the top of his right boot.

McCloud was here on this humid night to meet Johnny Lybrand, a burly, 6-foot-tall suspected animal smuggler. It was just two months past McCloud's 23rd birthday, and he was working his first undercover case for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Accompanying McCloud were two backup

agents masquerading as his companions. But the mission's success depended on McCloud and his expertise with reptiles.

Lybrand opened the warehouse door, peered suspiciously down the darkened street, then motioned the trio inside. A single bulb illuminated the one-story building. Skulking about the floor were more than 30 American alligators — at the time an endangered species. Their tails scraped across the bare concrete, and the animals made ominous bellows and rumbling noises.

The other two agents recoiled at the sight, but McCloud, who had spent most of his life around reptiles, waded right in. He moved a 6-foot-long gator aside with his boot and joined Lybrand at

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a battered wooden desk, the building's sole piece of furniture.

McCloud was blond, slender, amiable and quick on his feet. A scar from a rattlesnake bite creased the tip of his right index finger. He had introduced himself to Lybrand as Ken Simmons, a college zoology major who wanted to make extra money trading endangered animals.

Nevertheless, Lybrand remained wary. Using Latin species names, he peppered McCloud with questions about reptiles. McCloud answered with ease.

When McCloud agreed to a price, Lybrand became more agitated. He pulled open the bottom desk drawer and withdrew a silver revolver, thrusting the gun in McCloud's face and demanding to know if he was a game ranger.

McCloud leaned forward and spoke firmly. "How do I know that you aren't a game ranger? How do I know that you aren't setting me up? This is your place, not mine."

Both men stared at each other for a moment, then Lybrand put the revolver aside. McCloud's reaction struck the right note; from then on, he and Johnny Lybrand got along just fine.

McCloud peeled off some hundreds and purchased eight juvenile gators. He and Lybrand shook hands amid promises of future deals. They wrapped the gators' heads with burlap bags to keep them calm, and "Ken Simmons" and his two friends drove away with the trunk of their rental car packed with reptiles.

At midnight, the trio arrived back at their motel in Nashville, Tenn. McCloud worried that leaving the gators in the cramped trunk overnight might harm the animals. While the backup agents kept a lookout, he lugged the creatures up to his second-story room, where he watched over them until morning.

Within days, Lybrand was shipping tiny, just-hatched alligators to a post office box provided by McCloud and beginning to reveal other contacts in his network of dealers and poachers.

The 1978 Lybrand case launched an undercover career for McCloud that eventually landed him on a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Special Ops team working long-term covert operations

aimed at stopping the international smuggling of endangered species.

"Not many special agents have the aptitude to work covertly," says Gary Mowad, who went to special agent

school with McCloud and was the former deputy chief of law enforcement for the USFWS. "Agents are often on their own, and it's dangerous work. You can imagine how bad it would be getting



“Imagine how bad it would be getting discovered in the middle of an operation with no backup.”



Ken McCloud, a former U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service special agent, handles such animals as a boa constrictor (previous page) and an iguana at the Peninsula Humane Society in San Mateo, Calif.

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The number of USFWS special agents hovers around 200, but fewer than 10 work undercover. As part of this select group, McCloud learned to blend with his environment like a chameleon. He assumed false identities, operated fake businesses, was threatened and assaulted, and had contracts put out on his life.

He loved his work.

Although McCloud spent more than

20 years with the elite Special Ops group before retiring because of an injury, his exploits are largely unknown. His story offers a glimpse into the underworld where the fate of so many species hangs in the balance.

A disquieting economic equation drives illegal wildlife trafficking: Collectors covet rare species, and the rarer a plant or animal becomes,

the greater its value on the black market. There seems to be no limit on what collectors will pay: \$30,000 for a radiated tortoise from Madagascar, \$100,000 for a Spix’s macaw from Brazil. To serve these collectors, smugglers target wildlife most in need of protection, which creates a market-driven extinction vortex.

Tom Strickland, assistant secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, says that U.S. agencies confiscate \$10 million of illegal wildlife annually na-

tionwide. “And that’s just the tip of the iceberg,” he says.

TRAFFIC, an international wildlife trade-monitoring network, estimates that each year illegal trafficking rakes in billions of dollars in profits. The often-lax enforcement and slap-on-the-wrist penalties make this illicit activity attractive to smugglers. In recent years, environmental crimes have been taken more seriously as conservationists and prosecutors have pushed to close legal loopholes and make enforcement more effective.

The black market in endangered wildlife puts enormous pressure on plants and animals that are already losing ground to habitat destruction, pollution, climate change, overexploitation and invasive species. A U.N. report released in May concludes that the cumulative effect on Earth’s wildlife threatens the livelihoods and security of hundreds of millions of people. The future of food, fiber, medications, fresh water, pollination of crops, filtration of pollutants and protection from natural disasters is of “profound concern.”

According to the World Wildlife Fund, unsustainable wildlife trading is second only to habitat destruction as a global threat to species survival.

Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson, who has devoted much of his career to preserving biodiversity, worries that the massive wave of human-induced species loss has reached a level that rivals the catastrophic extinction that wiped out the dinosaurs 65 million years ago.

“The current extinction rate is at least 1,000 times above normal,” Wilson says. He predicts that unless we can navigate the “bottleneck of human overpopulation and overconsumption,” by the end of this century, we could lose half of Earth’s biodiversity.

In 1992, world leaders at the Earth Summit established the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Under the auspices of the CBD, 193 countries pledged to achieve “by 2010 a significant reduction of the current rate of biodiversity loss.”

The agreement failed.

“The target has not been met,” U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in



Clockwise from top: Species protected by Ken McCloud include Australian black-headed pythons seized in Germany during Operation Chameleon (an Angolan python is in the cage); a blue Vanda orchid; E. woodii cycads from South Africa; other South African cycads; one of the iguanas confiscated during Operation Chameleon.



a May report. He warned that the pressures leading to biodiversity loss are intensifying and that current trends are bringing us closer to tipping points that would reduce the capacity of ecosystems to provide for human needs.

The failure of the agreement prompted the United Nations to declare 2010 the Year of Biodiversity and to sponsor a world summit in October in Nagoya, Japan. Nearly 200 nations agreed to a new strategic plan that aims to reduce by half the rate of biodiversity decline projected for 2050.

Two new studies from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) released at the conference underscore the urgency of the new

agreement. The reports conclude that 22 percent of all plants and 20 percent of the world’s vertebrates — mammals, fish, birds, reptiles and amphibians — are in danger of extinction.

Reducing the yearly multi-billion-dollar black market in endangered species represents a critical component in preventing the collapse of the world’s wildlife. Veteran law enforcement officials say that although success ultimately depends on education and on changing the economic incentives that drive wildlife trafficking, the first line of defense is enforcement. That includes the work of special agents such as Ken McCloud.

SMOKES PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF GERMAN LAW ENFORCEMENT AND KEN MC CLOUD; IGUANA PHOTOGRAPH BY PAO MOTOMIYAMA/THE LOS ANGELES ZOO

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID L. MARTIN COURTESY OF KEN MC CLOUD;



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McCloud's earliest memories are of crawling around in the back yard of his childhood home near San Francisco, looking for lizards in the woodpile. As a boy, McCloud memorized the Latin names for different species and wrote to biologists with questions. When his parents suggested a trip to Disneyland, he asked instead to visit an alligator farm.

By age 12, he was helping out with reptiles at a nearby community college. Two years later, as word of his herpetological prowess spread, he received his first job offer.

"A group of wealthy investors who were building a reptile park actually

flew me to Toronto for an interview," McCloud says. "Some of the animals wouldn't eat in captivity, and I helped solve the problem. They were impressed enough to offer me a position as curator of their endangered reptiles." But his parents said no way.

As soon as McCloud could drive, he took a part-time job caring for reptiles at the Steinhart Aquarium in San Francisco. He began corresponding with Harry Greene, at the time a doctoral student who later became a Cornell University professor and a world expert on snakes. Years later, McCloud turned to Greene for help with some of his cases.

In his early 20s, McCloud made a perfectly logical career choice: He be-

came a wildlife inspector. Even though he didn't go through special agent training school for several more years, because of his herpetological expertise and his talent for working covertly, he found himself called upon for undercover assignments to catch smugglers of animals including hawks, salamanders and tigers. He discovered that collectors who coveted the rarest of the rare would take great personal risks and pay exorbitant prices to acquire their heart's desire.

"Wildlife collectors are absolutely obsessive," McCloud says. "Their whole life revolves around their collecting. Whether it's butterflies or orchids or snakes, their obsession is something that almost needs to be treated with a medication."

The biggest case of McCloud's career was a long-term operation to take down some of the most powerful illegal reptile dealers in the world. With a delightful sense of irony, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service called it Operation Chameleon.

McCloud adopted a new persona, becoming a reptile trader named Mark Phillips. However, because McCloud circulated widely in the herpetology world, he worried that he might be recognized at an expo or trade show. He needed a disguise.

"I grew this big moustache and beard," he says. "I grew a ponytail. And then, every month, I spent four hours in a beauty salon getting my hair dyed dark brown."

The disguise worked.

Operation Chameleon sought to stop the flourishing international trade in endangered reptiles. Through a Canadian contact, McCloud connected with two Germans — Frank Lehmeier and Wolfgang Kloe — who were suspected of smuggling Madagascan reptiles. Working undercover as Mark Phillips, McCloud began the time-consuming process of making contacts and building trust with Lehmeier and Kloe's organization.

McCloud often met with wildlife

traders in hotel rooms. They never suspected that McCloud's briefcase, sitting so innocently on the night stand, contained a pinhole video camera. The videos show McCloud joking with traders, offering them beer, counting out money, handling rare snakes.

The wildlife that smugglers brought to those sterile hotel rooms were some of Earth's most endangered. Harry Greene, the Cornell herpetologist whom McCloud had befriended as a teen, recalls McCloud contacting him one day to ask for help in verifying the identity of reptiles purchased in an undercover deal.

"I was stunned," Greene says. "There were ploughshare tortoises, the rarest in the world. There were baby Komodo dragons and Chinese alligators. I couldn't have imagined that people were dealing in black markets for such super-endangered species."

“There I was, supposed to be Mark Phillips. And suddenly my backup agent ... calls me Ken.”

These meetings were fraught with peril. One day, McCloud met with three Canadian suspects to buy endangered snakes. For protection, McCloud had another undercover agent with him posing as a friend.

"There I was, supposed to be Mark Phillips," McCloud says. "And suddenly my backup agent forgets and calls me Ken. He says: 'Yeah, Ken, the other day. ...'"

McCloud reacted instantly. "I spoke right up and finished his sentence. Then I said, 'And I told the guy that you don't mess around with Mark Phillips.' I got the name Mark Phillips right back out there. The suspects didn't have time to think. And lucky for me, it went right by them."

To avoid a fatal slipup, McCloud took to taping the business card with his current alias to the special undercover phone he used. He kept meticulous

notes. He prepared for each meeting and call. He could not be too careful.

Many months passed, and Operation Chameleon accumulated a mountain of evidence. McCloud, however, scarcely had a life outside of his work. He regularly clocked 17-hour days, and the stress took a toll. He actually received a disciplinary letter cautioning him to reduce his work hours.

McCloud also routinely cared for animals acquired in black market deals. Because of his talent at reviving sick and injured creatures, McCloud acquired the nickname "Doc." He and his wife, Rose, also a wildlife inspector, took into their home leopard cubs, a chimpanzee and more. The McClouds were veterinarians, husbandry specialists, cage cleaners and caretakers. It took hours of work and added to the stress.

As McCloud's role in Operation Chameleon reached a finale, word came

that a number of the major players, including Lehmeier and Kloe, were planning to travel to the United States for an international reptile expo in Florida. It looked like the perfect opportunity for a sting.

Shortly before the expo, the ringleader, Frank Lehmeier, called McCloud from Germany saying he had gotten word that McCloud was working for the government. He angrily accused McCloud of being a federal agent.

"I denied, denied, denied," McCloud says. "I told him I didn't know anything about Fish and Wildlife. I told him it was a crazy idea."

Lehmeier remained skeptical and canceled his travel arrangements. But other organization members were still planning to attend the reptile expo — including Lehmeier's second in command, Wolfgang Kloe.

McCloud met Kloe in Florida and

conducted one last deal. Later, in a Waffle House parking lot, agents swooped in and arrested Kloe as he walked to his car.

Once Kloe was handcuffed, McCloud came over to him. Still not understanding what had happened, Kloe greeted him as Mark Phillips. McCloud held up his badge and introduced himself. "My name is really Ken McCloud, and I'm a federal agent," he said.

McCloud's work on Operation Chameleon was far from over. The long months of undercover investigations had to be turned into convictions. The next phase depended on the U.S. Department of Justice.

McCloud and the other agents painstakingly built the legal case, guided by Elinor Colbourn, a senior trial attorney in the environmental crimes section of the Justice Department and lead prosecutor for Operation Chameleon.

One night, Colbourn, the agents and the other prosecutors met for dinner at a restaurant in Florida. Several of the world's rarest tortoises had been confiscated, and McCloud had taken them to his hotel room for safekeeping.

"While we were eating dinner, Ken noticed that most of the dishes came with decorative kale on the plates," Colbourn says. "Ken asked the waiter for a doggie bag, and we all donated our kale for the tortoises. The waiter looked at us like we were crazy."

Ironically, the case that ended McCloud's undercover career had nothing to do with dangerous reptiles. As the Operation Chameleon convictions were completed, McCloud turned his attention to one of the most threatened plant groups in the world: cycads.

These weirdly beautiful subtropical plants flourished during the Jurassic Period. They have spiky, frond-like foliage that harkens back to a prehistoric age.

Only about 300 cycad species sur-

vive, and many of these are under assault from black-market smugglers. Although some cycads are commercially available, others that grow wild in Australia, South Africa and Latin America are so rare that a single plant commands \$60,000.

For this new case, called Operation Botany, McCloud became a clean-cut businessman who favored shirts with epaulettes and who wore his hair short with a neat, gray-flecked beard. "Marty Sterns" ran Hu Enterprises, a San Francisco-area commercial landscaping company that specialized in cycads.

As the months passed, the warehouse operated by Hu Enterprises began to fill with hundreds of rare plants. One summer day, McCloud drove to the San Francisco airport to receive a large shipment of illegal cycads. He needed to lift the plants that each weighed 100 pounds or more into his van — and he was alone. Despite an aching back, he kept pushing to complete the job. On the return trip to the warehouse, he lost all feeling in his right leg. When he woke up the next morning, he couldn't move.


As Operation Botany wrapped up with the arrest of nearly a dozen international smugglers, McCloud underwent the first of two back surgeries. Although the operations provided some relief, he remained in constant pain that continues to this day.

But he continues to pursue the two passions that have guided his life: saving endangered species and catching the bad guys. He now works part time as a special crimes investigator for the Peninsula Humane Society near San Francisco, and he still maintains his wildlife contacts worldwide in the battle to conserve imperiled wildlife.

If his back will cooperate, he's hoping to spend time conducting radio telemetry fieldwork on ridge-nosed rattlesnakes with his old friend, Cornell herpetologist Harry Greene.

After his parents died, McCloud decided to move back to his childhood home. Rose helped him remodel the house, adding rooms and even putting in a few terrariums holding reptiles

such as Gila monsters and a radiated tortoise.

The back yard, where he once roamed as a small child, is neatly landscaped and hung with bird feeders. Non-endangered cycads purchased from a local nursery line one side of the garden. Just as he did five decades ago, McCloud still likes to wander out to the yard where he spent so much time as a young boy poking around in the woodpile. You never know when something interesting might turn up. 

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McCloud cares for this Gila monster at his home in Los Altos, Calif.