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Dr. George B. Schaller – Biography

George B. Schaller, Ph.D. (born 1933) is recognized by many as the world's pre-eminent field biologist, studying wildlife throughout Africa, Asia and South America. Born in Berlin, Dr. Schaller grew up in Germany, but moved to Missouri as a teen. He is Senior Conservationist for the Bronx Zoo-based Wildlife Conservation Society and holder of the Ella Millbank Foshay Chair in Wildlife Conservation. Schaller spends most of his time in the field, as he has for the past 50 years, in the wilds of Asia, Africa, and South America, where he has studied and helped protect animals as diverse as the mountain gorilla, the giant panda, the tiger, the lion, and the wild sheep and goats of the Himalayas.

For the past decade, Schaller has studied wildlife mainly in Mongolia, Laos, and the Tibetan Plateau of China. Two of his most recent books are *A Naturalist and Other Beasts: Tales from a Life in the Field* (2007) and *Wildlife of the Tibetan Steppe* (2000). Dr. Schaller is now working primarily in Tibet, Iran and Tajikistan.

Early life

Schaller received his Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Alaska in 1955, and went on to the University of Wisconsin-Madison to obtain his Ph.D. in 1962. From 1962 to 1963, he was a fellow at the Behavioral Sciences department of Stanford University. From 1963 to 1966, Schaller served as research associate for the Johns Hopkins University Pathobiology department, and from 1966 to 1972, served as the Rockefeller University's and New York Zoological Society's research associate in research and animal behavior. He later served as Director of the New York Zoological Society's International Conservation Program from 1979 to 1988.

Mountain gorilla research

In 1959, when Schaller was only 26, he traveled to Central Africa to study and live with the mountain gorillas (*Gorilla beringei beringei*) of the Virunga Volcanoes. Little was known about the life of gorillas in the wild until the publication of his book, *The Mountain Gorilla: Ecology and Behavior*, in 1963 that first conveyed to the general public just how profoundly intelligent and gentle gorillas really are, contrary to then-common beliefs. Schaller has more recently recounted his epic two year study in *The Year of the Gorilla*, which also provides a broader historical perspective on the efforts to save one of humankind's nearest relatives from the brink of extinction.

The American zoologist, Dian Fossey, with assistance from the National Geographic Society and Louis Leakey, followed Schaller's ground-breaking field research on mountain gorillas in the Virungas. Schaller and Fossey were instrumental in dispelling the public perception of gorillas as brutes, by demonstrably establishing the deep compassion and social intelligence evident among gorillas, and how very closely their behavior parallels that of humans.

"No one who looks into a gorilla's eyes - intelligent, gentle, vulnerable - can remain unchanged, for the gap between ape and human vanishes; we know that the gorilla still lives within us. Do gorillas also recognize this ancient connection?" - George Schaller

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Conservation career

In 1966, Schaller and his wife traveled to Tanzania to live in the Serengeti, and Schaller conducted one of the first studies of social behavior and movement of Africa's big cats.

In the fall of 1973, Schaller went to the remote Himalayan region, 250 miles (402 km) inside Dolpo, an area of Nepal occupied by people of the Tibetan culture and ethnicity. Schaller was there to study the Himalayan Bharal (blue sheep) and possibly glimpse the elusive snow leopard, an animal rarely ever spotted in the wild. Schaller is one of only two Westerners known to have seen a snow leopard in Nepal between 1950 and 1978. Accompanying him on the trip was Peter Matthiessen, and as a result of the trip, Matthiessen wrote *The Snow Leopard* (1978) detailing the accounts of their travels and research, which won the National Book Award. In the late 1970s, Schaller spent time in Brazil studying the jaguar, capybara, alligator and other animals of the region.

In 1988, Schaller and his wife traveled to China's Chang Tang (Qian Tang) region to study the Giant Panda, and became the first Westerners permitted to enter the remote region. Schaller sought to refute the notion that the panda population was declining due to natural bamboo die-offs. Instead, Schaller found the panda's popularity was leading to its frequent capture, and was the biggest threat to the population. Schaller also found evidence that pandas were originally carnivores, but underwent an evolutionary change to accommodate a diet of bamboo, which is difficult to digest, reducing competition with other animals for food. Since Schaller's research, the panda population has increased in the wild by 45 percent.

In 1994, Schaller and Dr. Alan Rabinowitz were the first scientists to uncover the rare Saola, a forest-dwelling bovine in Laos. Later that year, Schaller rediscovered the Vietnamese Warty pig, once thought extinct. In 1996, he located a herd of Tibetan red deer, also thought extinct.

In 2003, Schaller returned to Chang Tang, and found the wildlife in the area had rebounded since his first trip to the region. Most significantly, the wild yak population, which was estimated at only 13 individuals, had grown to over 187. While in Tibet, Schaller worked on researching the rare Tibetan antelope, or chiru, whose population declined due to trophy hunting for their exotic wool. Working with Tibetan authorities, and the Liz Claiborne and Art Ortenberg Foundation, Schaller helped protect the breeding and calving grounds of the chiru in the Kunlun mountains of Xinjiang Province.

In 2007, Schaller worked with Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and China to develop a new "Peace Park" that would protect 20,000 square miles of habitat for the largest wild sheep species, the Marco Polo sheep. In danger due to their impressive spiral horns, which can measure up to 6 feet in length, the sheep is sought out as a trophy by international hunters. Schaller's research in the Pamir Mountains will play an important role in the park's creation.

Conservation results

Schaller's work in conservation has resulted in the protection of large stretches of area in the Amazon, Brazil, the Hindu Kush in Pakistan, and forests in Southeast Asia. Due to Schaller's work, over 20 parks or preserves worldwide have been established, including Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), the Shey-Phoksundo National Park in Nepal, and the Chang Tang Nature Reserve, one of the world's most significant wildlife refuges. At over 200,000 square miles the Chang Tang Nature Reserve is triple the size of America's largest wildlife refuge.

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Publications

Schaller has written more than 15 books on African and Asian mammals, including *Serengeti Lion: A Study of Predator–Prey Relations*, *The Last Panda* and *Tibet's Hidden Wilderness*, based on his own

studies, and supported by long-term observations of species in their natural habitats. Schaller has also written hundreds of magazine articles, and dozens of books and scientific articles about tigers, jaguars, cheetahs and leopards, as well as wild sheep and goats, rhinos and flamingos. Over more than five decades, Schaller's field research has helped shape wildlife protection efforts around the world.

Awards

The Indianapolis Prize is not Schaller's first professional recognition. His conservation honors include National Geographic's Lifetime Achievement Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the World Wildlife Fund's Gold Medal for: "Contributions to the understanding and conservation of endangered species." Schaller has also been awarded the International Cosmos Prize and the Tyler Prize for Environmental Achievement. He also was the first recipient of the Wildlife Conservation Society's Beebe Fellowship. Schaller's literary honors include The National Book Award (for *The Serengeti Lion* in 1973).

In recognition for his lifetime achievements, Dr. Schaller will receive the Indianapolis Prize – \$100,000 and the Lilly Medal – at a gala ceremony presented by the AES Corporation and hosted by award-winning actress and environmentalist Jane Alexander on Sept. 27, 2008, in Indianapolis. True to his view of working with locals and an eye on the future, Schaller plans to use the Prize money to give grants to young biologists in their own countries enabling them to gain experience in wildlife research and conservation.

The Indianapolis Prize was initiated by the Indianapolis Zoo as a significant component of its mission to inspire local and global communities to celebrate, protect, and preserve our natural world through conservation, education and research. This biennial award brings the world's attention to the cause of animal conservation and the brave, talented and dedicated men and women who spend their lives saving the Earth's endangered animal species.

To learn more about the Indianapolis Prize, please visit indianapolisprize.org.

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