

By Joseph R. Mendelson III

The call of the wild

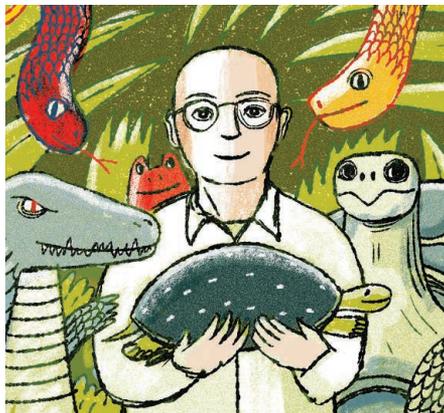
“**W**ould you like to move to Atlanta?” asked the voice on the phone. Just a few months earlier, I had earned tenure—my primary goal for decades—at Utah State University. But rather than basking in my promotion, I was thinking, “So, this is what I do for the rest of my career?” Lecturing to huge auditoriums of freshman nonmajors exhausted me. Encouraging my graduate students to publish, only to send them into a dismal job market, felt duplicitous. Because my university’s administration seemed to value funding more than publications, I found myself pursuing easy-to-get grants, sometimes on topics of only marginal interest to me. My tenure committee had pushed me to articulate a single central research theme, while I wanted to explore broadly in my area of amphibian and reptile studies. I was experiencing academic burnout.

So, when I got that call from a grad school friend who directed animal programs at Zoo Atlanta—a small zoo with a strong research reputation—I decided to check it out. I had never thought of working at a zoo before, and the prospect made me a little nervous. My background was in museums, and I had meager experience in animal care. But I set aside my reservations and flew to Atlanta.

My friend gave me a tour of the zoo’s impressive array of animals, and I met the equally impressive and engaging researchers. I learned that the position would entail basic research and conservation efforts, some service work, and an adjunct appointment at a nearby university. The zoo’s administration encouraged its researchers to publish in top journals, on topics of their choice, and promised to support my burgeoning conservation interests. The zoo’s amphibians and reptiles promised plenty of research opportunities, and I could teach classes as I wished. I was assured that other staff members were responsible for animal care. The job sounded ideal.

But the idea of walking away from tenure seemed surreal. My primary mentor and my graduate students lobbied intensively against this fantasy, calling it academic suicide. But my father—who is not an academic—said, “Working at a zoo, eh? Well, you’ve not done that before. You should try it.” I was terrified, but I did it.

The culture shock was real but refreshing. I discovered that zoo professionals value animals more than their CVs. They celebrate successes across the institution and share resources at levels I’d never seen in the ivory tower. I can invest substantial energy in conservation without worrying that these efforts may not result in publications. And without



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graduate students to support, I have little grant pressure. I have also had the most rewarding teaching experiences of my career. In my university appointment, I have developed a series of special-topic courses that attract focused students whose dedication, hard work, and insights are truly rewarding. I mentor many capable undergraduates and help them publish their first manuscripts.

Fourteen years in, the synergistic opportunities of a zoo, a university, and a deep involvement in conservation organizations have offered me a unique group of colleagues who expose me to a healthy diversity of perspectives and opportunities. My multifaceted environment makes burnout feel impossible. Recently,

my mentor called me after I published a high-profile paper and said that he was wrong to oppose my decision to go to a zoo. I was floored, as my mentor is not the sort that readily admits to being wrong. I also felt proud and supported.

Soon after my transition, I noticed colleagues assuming I had been denied tenure and that this zoo gig was the fallback option. Over time, though, the conversations have turned to requests for career advice, particularly from graduate students. I don’t have a ready line of advice; I certainly did not plan this route. But I can attest that rewarding career options in science can be found outside of the ivory tower, and to the value of having an open mind so that when serendipity knocks, you at least notice it. ■

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