

## **Interview:**

### **Carrying a Legacy**

**Name: Lee Durrell**

**Title: Honorary Director**

**At Durrell since: 1979 when she married Gerald Durrell**

“Before I came here”, explains Lee Durrell, Honorary Director of Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, “I somehow had the mistaken notion that the whole island of Jersey was devoted to Gerald Durrell’s zoo. So it was a bit of a surprise when I landed at the airport and there were farms and villages and things”, she laughs.

Since she arrived in Jersey from America in 1979, Lee has made Jersey her home. “Don’t forget, by now I have spent more of my life in Jersey than I have in America, so this is definitely my base”, she says.

Upon Gerald Durrell’s death in 1995, Lee assumed the mantle of Honorary Director, playing a strong ambassadorial role for the Trust. “Still having the Durrell name is a great responsibility”, she says, “I must be careful to use it wisely in my efforts to get people behind us and behind our mission, in terms of awareness, of course, but also in terms of financial support.

“One of my roles is to ensure the institution retains an institutional memory, in other words, maintains continuity in terms of the values that Gerry based it on in the first place. It is easy when a founder dies for people to come in with sweeping changes. I try to make sure that we don’t forget the significance of what we have done in the past and to see that our values are applied to our activities in the future”.

Durrell as an organisation has changed drastically in the 30 years Lee has been involved. “We were like a very small family in the late 70s”, she explains, “Of course many of the original people have retired now, which is sad in one way, but at the same time there is now room for all sorts of new people and perhaps new ways of thinking, so it’s a very exciting time. We certainly are a lot better now at telling the world our story. Previously, we just got on with our work, hiding our light under a bushel. Our mission is now clearly focused and articulated, as well as grounded in a very strong track record”.

As an organisation Durrell has made giant leaps in the last few years, launching a powerful scientific tool, *TopSpots*, and developing an ambitious vision for the future,

a multi-million pound expansion plan for the Trust's Jersey headquarters, linked to its work in *TopSpots*. Did Gerald ever imagine Durrell becoming as big and influential as it has? "That's a good question actually. I know he had a grand vision from the beginning, so he would have hoped the Trust would become something like this. He was particularly proud of the International Training Centre for instance. But Gerry always said he wanted us to be small but perfect, in other words not to turn into a mega-institution, but rather to concentrate on doing everything we do perfectly", says Lee.

"Now more than ever, particularly with *TopSpots* in mind, we have to ask ourselves the question of how big we want to be", she explains, "We can't do everything and do it well, so it is key that we remain focused and use our resources as efficiently as possible. This is a good reason, for example, to partner with other like-minded organisations, and I certainly see that happening in the future".

One organisation she particularly admires is the Disney Wildlife Conservation Foundation, the conservation arm of Disney's Animal Kingdom. "They have some of the best people from around the world", she explains, "and one of our previous staff is now Head of Birds over there. They are really good, and I like the idea of working with them. I also have great admiration for Fauna and Flora International, or FFI, which is the oldest conservation organisation in the world. And then of course many zoos are now excellent, such as Chester Zoo and some of the ones in America".

As Honorary Director of Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, Lee will be very busy during the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, a time when a clear formulation of key messages will be crucial. What does she think Gerald's main message would have been in his anniversary speech? "I like to think that his and my messages would be the same! The key message would be to communicate the importance of biodiversity and our focus on species conservation. Conservation is wide ranging, from saving species to stopping pollution to protecting forests. But I think our approach, which is to begin with the species from which the rest will follow, is very effective", she says.

"I feel passionately that the world now needs a hands-on approach, be that through breeding animals in a controlled situation or increasing their populations in the wild by managing their resources. This is what is going to have to happen if we are to save the planet's biodiversity. It's impossible to just leave a piece of wilderness alone now because it isn't alone. There are people and the impacts of people everywhere. So that is the message, and it is very much linked to looking at ourselves as a

species, at our own behaviour and its ecological consequences. Every species has an impact, and ours certainly isn't something to be proud of".

In her spare time Lee is also a keen pilot and has used her qualifications actively to benefit the Trust in recent years. She started flying in 1999 and got her pilot's licence in September of that year, three months before her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. "I always dreamed of learning to fly", she explains, "but Gerry was never keen because he thought it was so dangerous. When he was gone, I was free to do what I wanted, so I started taking lessons. I was well and truly bitten by the aviation bug", she laughs. Her hobby coincided with a time when flight links to Jersey were limited and airlines were putting more and more restrictions on carrying live animals. "I had the opportunity to take our animals directly from their home in Jersey to their new homes, so that has worked out really well", she says.

Durrell has set itself an ambitious future. "In 20 years time I see us as a world leader in species conservation, demonstrating to everyone that our approach is a valid and valuable way to save biodiversity", explains Lee. "Of course there will be challenges along the way; climate change, money and all the threats currently facing the world's species and habitats are just a few. We'll just keep working as hard and as smart as we can", she says.

"Gerry said once: 'People always ask me, "Mr Durrell, is there any hope?" Sometimes I ponder the question, but really I can't imagine doing anything else than work for what I believe in. Otherwise I'd just go somewhere warm and sit under a palm tree. But for me this is not an option.' That is very much the attitude we still live by today", Lee concludes.