

THE CHELONIAN RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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The Chelonian Research Institute is a private-sector, not-for-profit corporation with headquarters in Oviedo, Florida, USA. It has several functions, the primary one being a museum and systematics collection whose scope includes the tortoises and turtles of the world. The collections have been accumulated by the director for several decades, and as a result of both extensive global travel and donations by the general public, turtle and tortoise enthusiasts, and fellow institutions, the holdings have now reached a total of 12,066 catalogued specimens, with about 200 yet to be catalogued. They include at least some representation of all living genera of chelonians and about 95% of species. Specimens are never killed for the collection, although in some cases donated specimens from other museums were sacrificed when first collected.

This exhaustive coverage, made possible in part by the fact that CRI has the “luxury” of concentrating upon a single, relatively small component of the fauna of the world, has made the collection especially useful for scientists engaged in comprehensive studies of the Order Testudines and who need to examine, and make

direct comparisons among, a wide range of chelonian species. In addition, those who salvage turtle shells from archaeological sites find that the CRI holdings are ideal for them to make direct comparisons with skeletons on all the candidate species within the area and thus identify even very small fragments to the species level. Since its formal opening in 2000, CRI has hosted researchers from many nations, including the USA, Japan, France, Venezuela, Mexico, Kazakhstan, the UK, Canada, Italy, Germany, Burma, Madagascar, India, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and elsewhere.

Unlike traditional systematics collections, generally located downtown in capital cities where accommodations are very expensive and office hours extend from 9 am to 5 pm, CRI is able to offer complimentary accommodations to visiting scientists for protracted periods, and allows them to work on the collections until whatever hour they choose. This system is particularly welcome to graduate students, who are generally short on both time and money.

In addition to the research collections, CRI offers other attractions. It includes one of the best libraries of publications on turtles and tortoises in the world, and has several times served successfully as a “source of last resort” for students who need to locate a final shortlist of elusive publications as they complete their

dissertation requirements. It also includes a small but impressive gallery of art materials relating to turtles, ranging from original engravings from the mid and late 18th century to highly contemporary original paintings and lithographs from our own times.

Although the small town of Oviedo is developing at an extraordinary rate, the land holdings of CRI, less than half a mile from the town center, remain as a green oasis. They include about ten acres of well-forested property, with an extensive surviving fauna that includes gopher and Florida box turtles, about nine species of snake, various anole, gecko, and skink species, armadillos, white-tailed deer, raccoons, possums, pileated woodpeckers, wild turkeys, barred owls, and a host of other species. Within a mile of the Institute may be found a wide variety of aquatic turtle species, including common snappers, Florida and three-striped mud turtles, Florida softshells, chicken turtles, red-bellied and peninsula cooters, common and southern musk turtles, and others. The winding trails through the woods of the CRI property run past two traditional Arawak thatched roundhouses and an old orange grove, thus providing the “surprise” architecture, meditation trails, and orangerie that characterized some of the great European gardens of past centuries.

In addition to formal researchers, the Institute attracts a great many other visitors. It enjoys excellent relationships with the local institutions of higher education, including Rollins College, the University of Central Florida, and Valencia and Seminole Community colleges. We have made extensive use of volunteers from all of these, and also provide resources – advice, specimens, and literature for students writing term papers or doing their own research. The Institute has numerous exhibits, both in the form of actual displayed specimens and also art and artifacts and explanatory tableaux. Other art may be unrelated to turtles, and much of it is whimsical, even humorous (especially *humeur noire*); such are the privileges and self-indulgences of a non-governmental facility.

Finally, the Institute has live specimens on housed in the gardens and greenhouse. These include a cross-section of the world's turtle species, including snake-necked and snapping turtles, many cooters and sliders of the genera *Pseudemys* and *Trachemys*, sidenecks and box turtles, and outdoor exhibits of the larger tortoises – red-foot tortoises from South America, spurred tortoises from Africa, and the giants – a female Aldabra and three fast-growing young Galapagos tortoises. The giants are especially attractive to the children's groups who visit – the Brownies, the Hebrew day schoolers, home-schooled youngsters, and others.

