

Far from his Manhattan-based hotel and restaurant empire, Eric Goode has created an exotic sanctuary in woolly Ojai, California, for some of the rarest and most endangered tortoises and turtles in the world.

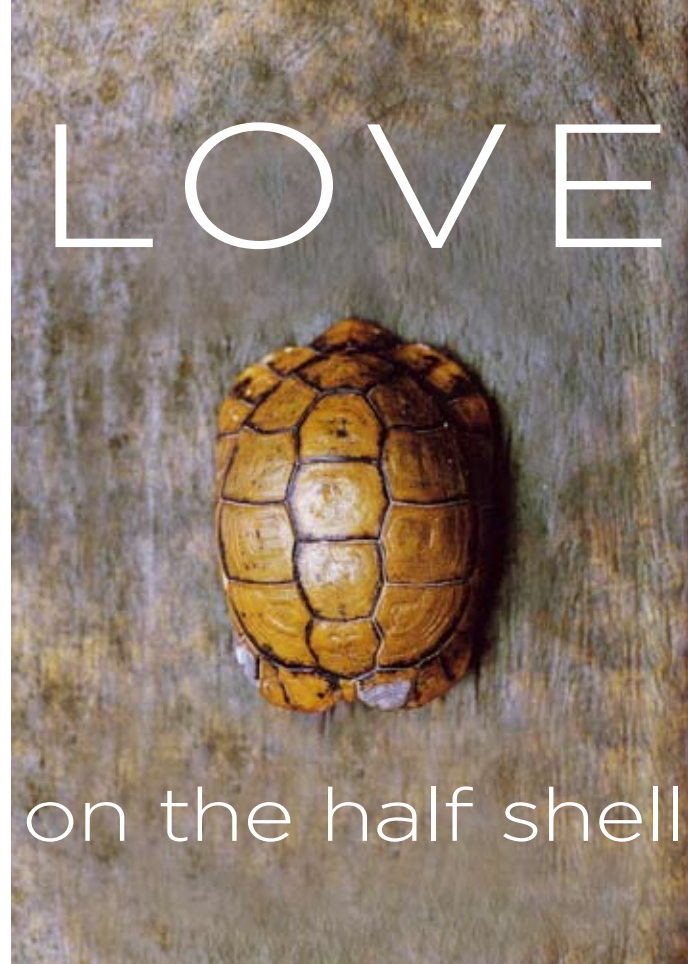
“I have always been into turtles. But I’ve been closeted about it,” says Eric Goode, Understatedly referring to his idyllic three-acre compound in Ojai, California, where he cares for, feeds, and houses 300 turtles and tortoises, 15 rare species in all, some of which subsist largely upon *hors d’oeuvres* of escargot.

Just north of Ventura, Highway 33 makes an inland trek from the Pacific Coast Highway into the foothills of the Sierra Madres. The notion that you’ve left Southern California behind first hits you as you drive through the menthol-scented colonnade of eucalyptus trees on the outskirts of Ojai. The shops and restaurants in the heart of town mostly fit within one long, continuous white stucco arcade—shading the Spanish tile walkway outside windows displaying crystals and dream catchers, vegetarian lunch specials, and watercolor landscapes. The skate park at the eastern edge of town is devoid of rebellion, as local kids would catch more flack for lighting up a cigarette than they would for lighting up a joint.

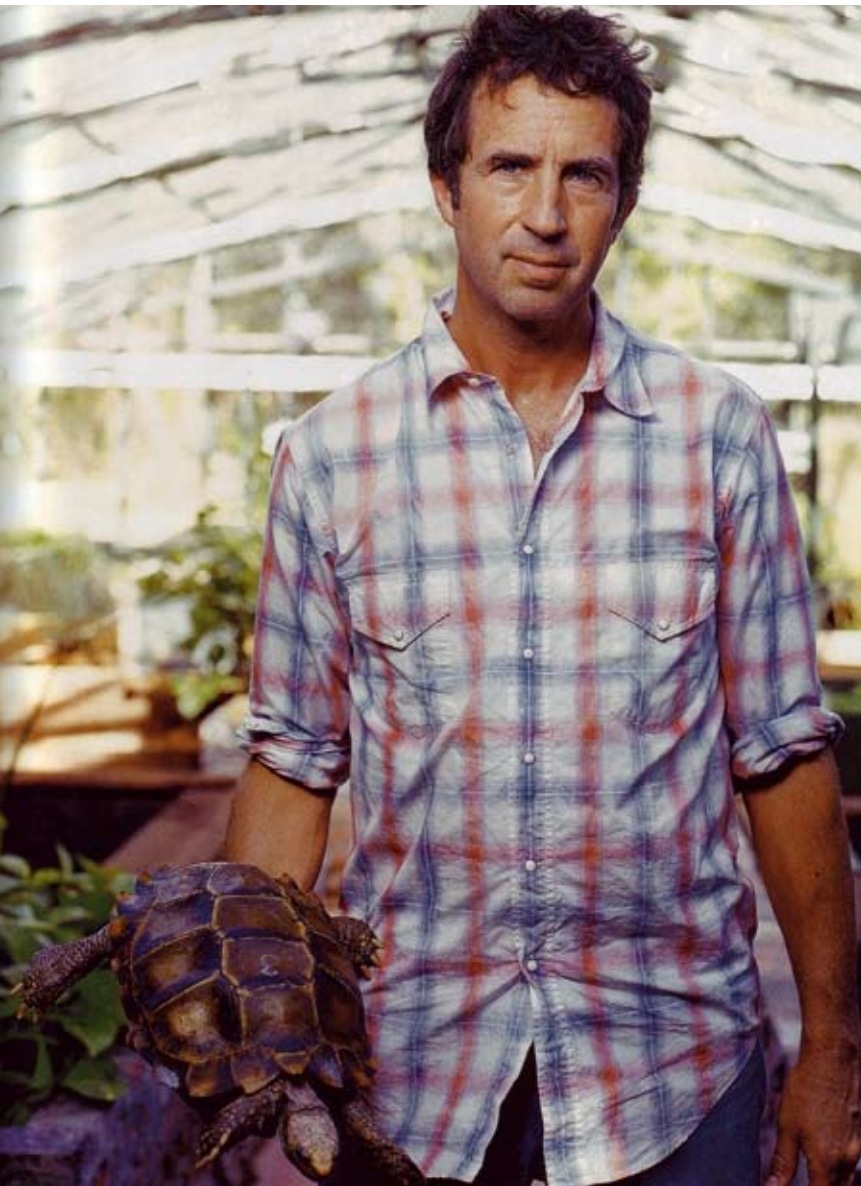
You might expect to find a few eccentric naturalists inhabiting a community such as this. But you probably wouldn’t expect any of them to go so far as to turn their bucolic home into a sanctuary for endangered turtles. And you certainly wouldn’t expect the one who’s done just that to be the same man who once turned the New York club scene on its ear in the 1980s with his fabled theme nightclub Area, where the closest thing to an endangered species was Andy Warhol.

“I’d always planned to do something like this with turtles at some point, and the Bronx Zoo situation gave me the opportunity,” says Goode, referring to a pivotal phone call he received two years ago from John L. Behler, the former curator of the Reptile Center at the Bronx Zoo. So-called “society” provides the turtle community ample room for anonymity, which helps to create a brotherhood of sorts for turtle enthusiasts. So when the Bronx Zoo needed a new locale and benefactor for the hard-shelled collection, they had a good idea of whom to call. “They knew I had the qualifications—not just from the scientific perspective, but also from the financial perspective,” says the 49-year-old Goode, who co-owns the Maritime hotel and the Waverly Inn, as well as his most recent projects, Lafayette House and the Bowery Hotel. For years, the Bronx Zoo had maintained a collection of rare and endangered turtles at an antebellum plantation-turned-wildlife refuge on St. Catherines Island—one of Georgia’s last undeveloped barrier islands. Goode offered to provide the animals with a new home for research and breeding. The climate in Southern California is better than the Bronx for turtle breeding, and on top of that, says Goode, “People want to see Panda bears in a zoo. Not turtles.” So the turtles were packed up and driven cross-country in an air-conditioned truck to their new swank digs on the West Coast.

The zoo’s Behler had passed away by the time the turtles made it from Georgia’s coastal islands to Goode’s California ranch, and their new caretaker named the sanctuary for him: The John L. Behler Chelonian Center. (For those of you out of the reptilian loop, “Chelonia” is the order of turtles and tortoises.) The center is part of the larger Goode Conservancy, on the whose board sits Bill Holmstrom, the current reptile collection manager of the Bronx Zoo; Dr. Anders Rhodin, a nationally-recognized turtle taxidermist and orthopedic surgeon; Brett Stearns, noted herpetologist; and Gregory George, design specialist for zoological displays. All of them share Goode’s vision of eventually creating a global conservancy to not just protect turtles in places such as this, but to help protect them in their countries of origin.



“My father was an artist and my mother was a conservationist,” says Goode, laying out his various component parts in such a way as to humbly subtract his own talent and drive from his life equation. The tips of Goode’s muddied boots are worn through to their steel toes. His Levi’s are frayed at the hems. His loose-fitting plaid shirt is un-tucked and rolled up at the sleeves. “I try to have a balance in my life between the urban world and the natural world,” he says. “As I’ve gotten older, I’ve put more focus on the natural world. The things I did with nightlife merged into my



restaurants and my hotels, and eventually, that became about figuring out a way to do what I do here.”

As Goode speaks, he squints into the glare of noon at his swimming pool and the stone-hedged pathway leading past it, around orange trees and cacti and over the stone stream-bed that ushers the foothill runoff of winter rains across the property. “This was a sickness I got when I was six, and my parents gave me a turtle,” says Goode. “I’ve been into them ever since. It grew into a love of all kinds of animals, but especially reptiles, and I gravitated towards turtles because you didn’t have to feed them live animals like you would a snake.”

Goode enters a guesthouse on the grounds. A stuffed alligator hangs on the wall above a rusty metal café table on which Goode’s sister Jennifer and his girlfriend, Miye McCullough are presently setting a California country buffet: prosciutto-wrapped melon, homemade falafel, and a sandwich tray. “He’s kept turtles in New York for years,” says McCullough, “The roof of his apartment is a turtle habitat.”

Talk around the lunch table turns to their recent trip to the Galapagos, where Goode says “we filmed and we scuba-dived, observing galapagos tortoises in nature, and looking into how they are protected there so we’ll know how to care for the ones we’re expecting to have here.” Says Maurice Rodriguez, director of operations for the Maritime and a board member of the Goode Conservancy, “He doesn’t travel anywhere on the planet where there are no turtles.”

When his affection for turtles was still in the closet, Goode studied design at Parsons, and took an artistic approach to the clubs he started in New York. “Area was ephemeral,” he says. “It was like an art project. Keith Haring painted our skateboard ramp. Warhol did our windows. Baquiat painted for us. We changed the space like you would art in a gallery—every six weeks—and we always thought of it as something we’d do just as long as it made us happy.” Area, however, wasn’t just an expression of art, but a place to work out some of his interests: Bats, sharks, and other live animals made their way into the club’s changing exhibits. (“Natural History” was one of the more memorable “themes.”)

In the mid-’80s, Goode was looking for a place in Los Angeles, but couldn’t quite get over his aversion to actually living there. So he ended up buying the spread near Ojai instead; it’s a town where he’d spent part of his childhood. “When I was a kid, we moved from New York to California, and I spend every idle moment in these mountains.”



When he first purchased the house and grounds in 1989, it was just a few overgrown acres of land surrounding a neglected 1920s farmhouse. The elderly man who had lived (and died) there before him had spent his life trying to disprove the existence of Christ, and Goode's first walk-through of his new home was conducted via a labyrinth of floor-to-ceiling piles of musty books, magazines, and newspapers the prior resident had amassed from his own obsession. Now the house is absorbed by hand-me-downs of Goode's past Manhattan clubs: a Mies Van De Rohe divan; iron-and-onyx floor lamps, a pair of gilt-trim, cigarette-burned black-velvet sofas, and a pair of stuffed Doberman Pinchers.

Goode has built all the newer buildings for his operation in the same neo-Mediterranean style of the original house. The most recent addition is equal parts caretaker's house and high-tech terrarium. Carrot sticks, apples, tomatoes, and live escargots are kept in a brushed-steel Sub-Zero. Turtle eggs are incubated in a re-purposed high-end wine cooler. Clinical supplies are kept in vintage glass and steel cabinetry. And on the wall above the indoor habitat hangs a hand-painted map of Southeast Asia--the ancestral home of many of these turtles. While giving us a tour, Goode reaches into one of the sectioned habitats and lifts up a rock to reveal the flat, rock-dwelling Pancake Tortoise (*Malocochersus Tornieri*), then he picks up a Radiated Tortoise (*Geochelone Radiata*) with a vivid pattern on its shell. "This was being sold illegally for \$20,000 when we got it," says Goode. "People try to collect them like stamps."

The turtles at Goode's center have shells ranging from plain olive drab to the most geometrically complex patterns. Some you could fit 12 of in your hand, while others are so big you'd need a wheelbarrow to move them. Only two of them have names. There's "Sherman"--as in, the tank--who belongs to a staff biologist. And then there is the one known as (Sir-Humps-A-Lot)--so active is he in his carousing that he wore out his bottom shell and had to be fitted with a prosthetic, fiberglass underside. The clacking shells and reptilian wheezing of turtle love is overheard hourly here.

The humidity-reliant species live in a greenhouse rigged with humidifiers, floor heaters, and automatic sunshades to keep their temperature and humidity at a constant level. The structure itself is a 1920's brick and glass beauty where Gatsby would've grown his roses--purchased in New York, shipped cross-country and reassembled in California. Among its inhabitants is the Impressed Tortoise (*Manouria Impressa*), capable of subsisting on only one item on the planet: oyster mushrooms. A week of Shitakes and they'd be dead. In addition to the box of gourmet fungi, Goode brings a plastic tub of escargots into the greenhouse and his nephews feed them to eager water turtles with algae-coated shells. A single crunch is heard as they go down. "Those are the same snails you'd get in a French restaurant," says Goode.

