



On September 11, in a remote corner of Myanmar, herpetologist Joseph Slowinski reached into a snake bag, as he had done a thousand times before. The next 28 hours would be his last. **MARK W. MOFFETT** recounts the death of a friend—a man for whom beauty lay in a flash of danger hidden in wet grass.



Slowinski in extremis, 11 A.M.: from left to right, American researcher Guin Wogan, Chinese herpetologist Rao Dingqi, Joe Slowinski, Burmese assistant U Po Cho, and American ichthyologist David Catania

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK W. MOFFETT

THAT MORNING I WOKE at dawn and crawled from my tent into the big unpainted schoolroom where the members of our biology expedition slept. We were in Rat Baw, a village in the far north of Myanmar. Outside, expedition leader and herpetologist Joe Slowinski and his best friend, photographer Dong Lin, stood wearing matching green T-shirts stenciled with one of Dong's photos of a cobra, poised to strike. I walked up as Joe's Burmese field assistant, U Htun Win, held out a snake bag. "I think it's a *Dinodon*," he was saying. Joe extended his right hand into the bag. When it reappeared, a pencil-thin, gray-banded snake swung from the base of his middle finger. "That's a fucking krait," Joe said. He pulled off the snake and kneaded the bitten area, seemingly unmarked, with a fingernail.

Other scientists have been known to cut off their finger at such a moment. Joe sat down to join the rest of us for breakfast at a long wooden school table, joking about his thick skin. It was 7 A.M. on September 11, 2001.

I'D KNOWN JOE FOR TWO YEARS, seeing him most often when he drove over to Berkeley for evening herpetology seminars at the University of California. A 38-year-old field biologist with the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, he had published papers on evolutionary theory, systematics, and the origins of biological diversity—but mostly he was the man to talk

to about cobras. For years, Joe had been concentrating on the rich biological triangle of Southeast Asia where Myanmar—still commonly known as Burma—and Laos meet southwestern China. He was conducting a comprehensive survey of the herpetofauna of Burma; on ten expeditions since 1997, he'd found 18 new species of amphibians and reptiles, including a new spitting cobra, *Naja mandalayensis*—which he considered “the ultimate discovery.” He hoped to help the country establish a biodiversity museum; eventually he wanted to write the definitive book on the area's natural history.

Before a seminar, Joe, Dong Lin, and I would share beers at La Val's Pizza. Dong, now in his midforties, told me how, after surviving Tiananmen Square with 60 stitches, he had escaped China in 1990 and made his way to a position in photography at Cal Academy. There, Joe helped guide him through the book *English as a Second F**king Language*, and soon after, Dong started to join him as expedition photographer. Over Coronas, Joe would describe his upcoming trips, slapping me on the back and telling his best adventure stories to entice me to “come along this time, bro.”

As an entomology researcher at Berkeley, I recognized in Joe someone like myself, someone who in earliest childhood fell hard for a disrespected creature—in Joe's case snakes, in mine ants—and managed to retain that fascination into adulthood and even build it into a career. He had a boy's sandy hair and freckles, and his habitual expression of sheer uninhibited wonder was matched by a precise and agile mind. His fieldwork had the same old-fashioned sense of exploration I'd grown up admiring in 19th-century scientist-explorers like Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace.

Time and again, Joe's schedule and mine had conflicted. Then one night in La Val's he described a trip coming up in September. He'd recruited colleagues from different disciplines to conduct a broad species inventory of Burma's remote northern mountains. Perfect.

THE EXPEDITION WOULD TAKE us into the foothills of the Himalayas; it was scheduled to last six weeks and span 200 miles. Our group of eight American and two Chinese scientists and four Burmese field assistants gathered on September 3 in the village of Machan Baw—the dusty remnant of an old British outpost—and started walking, accompanied by a long line of porters. Machan Baw sits at 1,400 feet; the plan was to climb above 10,000 feet, surveying a range of habitats from subtropical forests to temperate highlands, and traveling eventually into the new Hkakabo Razi National Park.

Adventures are made mostly in the recollecting mind; the doing is generally more drudgery than drama. It was monsoon season, and our path, more mud trough than trail, was hard slogging. Leeches emerged in droves. We tried to keep them at bay by spitting tobacco juice onto our legs or wearing panty hose but Joe, trekking in shorts and sandals, simply put up with them, as did many of the porters. At times I'd look down and see the rain puddles along our route were red with blood.

The first week took us through farmland and villages. Houses with roughly stacked pole walls were raised on stilts so that pigs and chickens (and their legions of fleas) could sleep in the slightly protected muck below. Each evening sandflies speckled our arms with welts, while mosquitoes threatened us with a

malaria resistant to most prophylactics—one reason we zipped ourselves into tents even when sleeping under a roof.

In patches of rainforest between rice paddies we found enough species to keep us moving eagerly toward richer territory. The sonic duet of gibbons and two huge-beaked hornbills passing overhead indicated more pristine habitat nearby. After each trek, Joe would gather bags with the day's specimens from his Burmese team and from our frog specialist, Guin Wogan,



ENTWINED FATES: SLOWINSKI IN BURMA IN MAY 1999; OPPOSITE, THE FATAL KRAIT

one of his graduate students at Cal Academy. Dong Lin would video the most unusual individuals. If venomous snakes were involved, Joe would wrangle them so Dong could get the best footage, shooting from inches away—greatly impressing the inevitable crowd of Burmese onlookers.

Joe was careful with snakes; he'd chased them since he was a boy in Kansas City, Missouri. He was also famous for close calls. Bitten by a copperhead in college in Kansas, he'd gone back the next day to catch another, left-handed. On a previous trip to Burma, a spitting cobra had struck through the bag

Joe put it in, stabbing his finger. He waited calmly for the venom to take effect. Luck of the draw, he would say, telling the story: Sometimes a snake bites without injecting its toxins. On a later Burma trip, a cobra squirted venom into his eyes. After a few hours the excruciating pain passed. Joe never paused much over these incidents. He seemed to embody the understanding that a fully natural world includes the possibility that nature can kill us—and afterward glide freely away into the wet grass it came from. That love in any form involves an element of risk.

IT WAS GOOD TO SEE JOE AT WORK in the country he'd described so often. He was proud of his Burmese field assistants, on permanent loan to him from Myanmar's Department of Forestry. In a country with few scientists, Joe saw these young men and women as an essential resource for the future. Species inventories are a big part of conservation, and his assistants caught, preserved, and documented specimens year-round. Joe had struggled hard over the past five years to build government contacts—research in heavily militarized Burma is no simple thing.

Returning late at night by headlamp, Joe would unload his catch of snakes and frogs and sit with whoever was still awake, usually Dong Lin and me. During those conversations I began to see the different sides of my friend. Some nights it seemed he felt invincible. Downing Burmese rum, he knew he would rise high enough in the hierarchy of science to put

a stop to the “political bullshit” he saw all around him. Much of what he imagined seemed possible: He’d just been awarded a \$2.4 million grant from the National Science Foundation, already a sponsor of his ongoing Burma research, to study biodiversity in China’s Yunnan province. He confided a thousand ambitions, certain he’d realize them all.

Other times Joe raged into the night, once about another biologist working in Burma who he believed had blocked the original funding for this trip. Joe had hastily cobbled together funds from his other grants and gone anyway. His tirade explained something. I’d wondered why our expedition had come during the rainy season, when (as was evident once we started walking) we could have taken jeeps along much of the route any other time of the year. Remembering how discovery breeds rivalry and how scientists can turn research into races, I sat in a small dry spot surrounded by what seemed a world of mud, an understanding comrade to Joe’s fury.

Still other nights Joe grew melancholy. For years he’d focused only on science, he said; he’d been too single-minded, traveled too much, even for love. Now, though, he’d started a relationship with an ornithologist back home. He wondered if he should devote less time to snakes.

Managing the people and logistics along with his research on this trip was clearly taking a toll. There was a lot to worry about. Among the multitudinous supplies we’d brought were drying ovens and pounds of newspaper for the plant specimens, snap traps and mist nets for the mammals and birds, gallons of alcohol to preserve reptiles and insects, a generator and its gallons of fuel to recharge batteries for cameras and computers and to run the blacklight for attracting insects. Ninety-odd porters hauled the equipment of ten academics. Many of the inevitable problems were handled by a Burmese guide, but Joe had to think about them all. In addition, he’d paid \$44,000 to a well-connected expedition coordinator to cover the in-country expenses, yet somehow such basics as rice and bottled water were in astonishingly short supply, so Joe kept spending more, out of pocket. Nor was there any sign of the two military doctors and radiophone the government had promised. Joe guessed the real cost of the trip was probably a tenth of what the expedition had put down.

Then there were the scientists. Each of us wanted to work at our own pace and had our own agenda. Personalities often clash in the field, and for Joe, feeling responsible for the group’s harmony must have been one more stress, along with our long daytime treks and his own additional nocturnal collecting. I noticed the accumulating effect on him during a walk on September 10, the seventh day of the trip. Joe was moving sluggishly, and each time he paused to pull a leech from his leg, his fingers were visibly shaking.

AFTER IT WAS OVER, we’d all wonder why Joe had reached into the snake bag with barely a glance inside. As with any pivotal moment, the exact words exchanged beforehand would be endlessly debated. Snakes of the genus *Dinodon* are harmless, but some are near-perfect mimics of the multibanded krait (*Bungarus multicinctus*), a cousin of the cobra and much more deadly. As field team leader, U Htun Win should have known the difference—but he told us he’d been bitten by the snake the day before and nothing had happened. Joe, however, was the authority. Possibly simple exhaustion brought his

guard down; perhaps he failed to heed the uncertainty in U Htun Win’s tentative identification.

Following breakfast, around 7:30, Joe lay down. At 8 he noticed a tingling in the muscles of his hand, and asked Dong Lin to call the group together. By 8:15, two Burmese assistants started the run of eight miles to Naung-Mon, the nearest town with a radio. Joe calmly told us what would probably happen and what we should do. He described the effects of a slowly increasing paralysis, eventually requiring mouth-to-mouth respiration until he could be taken to a hospital. If he lived, the neurotoxins would work their way out of his system in 48 hours. He would be conscious, he told us, the whole time.

As the morning went on Joe had to reach up to open his eyelids. His breathing grew raspy; his voice was reduced to a slur. In time he could only write messages: “Please support my head, it’s hard for me.” “If I vomit, it could be bad.” “Can I lean back a little.” By noon he could no longer breathe on his own. “Blow harder,” he wrote. In his final message, minutes later, Joe spelled out “let me die.” We won’t let that happen, Guin Wogan said. Kick butt, Joe, I added.

At 3 P.M. our runners returned alone, and told us the military had requested an update before they would send an air rescue. Two fresh assistants were sent back, again insisting that a helicopter be sent. By evening the weather turned from the best we’d seen in a week on the trail to a renewed downpour; low clouds would impede the rescue again the next day. That night soldiers arrived on foot with an ancient field radio and a young Burmese doctor with two nurses and a little equipment, including an old respirator no one could get to work.

Throughout that long night, we all helped out as we could, but much of the time was spent in simple exhausted witness. From time to time, Dong would put his arm around various

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members of the group and say, “I love you.” In one long moment of vertigo, as someone who’s had his own close calls with snakes, I looked at Joe in the torchlight and saw how alike we were in build, complexion, even our features, and I felt I was somehow watching myself die. Looking at Dong, Guin, and U Htun Win standing silently nearby, I wondered if they felt something similar.

By 3 A.M. Joe could no longer signal us except with his big toe. His final communication occurred when ornithology assistant Maureen Flannery, whose strength had been keeping us all going, asked if she and Guin could stop doing mouth-to-mouth and let the guys take over. Joe’s toe signals indicated a preference for the women.

During the 26 stifling, sandfly-infested hours that the artificial respiration continued, four airliners plowed into their final destinations in New York, Washington, CONTINUED ON PAGE 130

and Pennsylvania. The only one of us who knew was David Catania, a Cal Academy ichthyologist so unobtrusive I often forgot he was there. Dave had listened to his shortwave radio after collapsing briefly in his tent late in the night. Keeping the news to himself, he came out and gave Joe mouth-to-mouth for hours, his face showering sweat. He refused to let anyone else take over, even long after Joe's heart had stopped.

At 12:25 P.M. on September 12, the doctor told us Joe's pulse was gone. We began three hours of CPR, in anticipation of a rescue helicopter that was never able to land.

JOE'S BODY WAS CREMATED in a small Buddhist ceremony two days later in the town of Myitkyina, and Dong Lin and some of the team brought his ashes back to San Francisco, along with many of the expedition specimens. Other members made their way home as best they could. It was not until two months later that I returned from Asia and visited Ground Zero in New York. Compared to the devastation before me, Joe's tragedy had been such a small, intimate drama. For everyone in Rat Baw but our team, September 11 had seemed an ordinary day. It was a place where death from such natural causes as snakebite was a common event—there are more snakebite deaths in Burma than almost anywhere else in the world. Children played in the field within yards of the room where our small circle performed CPR. Elders sat on benches outside, talking softly and watching the rain, as one supposes they always had.

One of Joe's gifts was the way that for him the ordinary always seemed to yield to the extraordinary. The day before the bite Joe had returned from a walk in Rat Baw flushed with excitement—he'd found a pair of entwined kraits. "It was beautiful. Goddamn beautiful! Courting like that, right in the middle of the trail. I've never seen anything like it." His arms sliced arcs in the soupy air. The weight of all our petty concerns had vanished from his face, and his eyes seemed to glow, as they always did at moments like this, with the love of snakes.

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