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Obituary

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Obituary

Jan Zima, (1952-2019)

We are sorry to announce that our dear friend, the leading European mammologist Jan (Honza) Zima, passed away on 26 March 2019, following a long and courageous fight against cancer.



Honza was born on 14 August 1952 in Prague. Encouraged by both his father and grandfather, his choice of future career was highly influenced by his school mate and life-long friend, Ivan Horáček, and by his advisor at Charles University in Prague, Vladimír Hanák, who directed him toward mammology, and chiropterology in particular. The topic of his graduation thesis, karyotypes of bats, went on to become the main theme of his scientific career, comparative cytogenetics of mammals. In 1976, Honza entered the then Institute of Vertebrate Zoology of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences (now Institute of Vertebrate Biology, Czech Academy of Sciences), where he started his postgraduate study as a "research candidate" in the Morphological Department under the supervision of the distinguished comparative embryologist, Oldřich Štěrba. Over the following years he went on to evolve and accelerate his career in cytogenetics. In collaboration with his "lab mate", the karyologist Bohumil Král, he has built a respected centre of mammalian karyology, collaborating with colleagues from the U.K. (Jeremy B. Searle), Italy (Ernesto Capanna, Carlo Redi, Silvia Garagna), Switzerland (Jacques Hausser), Germany (Marianne Volleth), Poland (Stanisław Fedyk, Jan M. Wójcik), Sweden (Karl Fredga, Erland Dannelid), France (Vitaly T. Volobouev) and the former Soviet Union (Nina S. Bulatova, Alina Mishta). Honza's collaboration with B. Král peaked with publication of the highly cited, three-volume review Karyotypes of European Mammals (1984), a "gold standard" in the field.

Honza was an excellent field zoologist and participated in many expeditions, not only throughout former Czechoslovakia but also in the Balkans, Ukraine, Poland, Turkey, Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan, Tian Shan, Pamir and Siberia. During this time, he rapidly became known as an outstanding and respected international expert in the field of comparative karyology; however, his scientific activities went well beyond the realm of chromosomes. Honza was interested in many facets of animal biodiversity, with an especial interest in the systematics, biogeography and phylogeny of mammals and other vertebrates, as well as conservation biology. He always strived for wide interdisciplinary collaboration, as illustrated by the high number and wide range of collaborators with which he published. A further characteristic of his scientific work was the introduction of new methods to zoological research. Though Honza always saw himself as a zoologist, he initiated the application of biochemical, and later, molecular genetic approaches to addressing zoological questions. He was one of the founders of the Czech Republic's National Animal Genetic Bank as well as the molecular laboratories at Charles University's Department of Zoology and the Studenec research facility of the Institute of Vertebrate Biology; this latter case representing a crucial turning point, triggering subsequent dynamic advances for the department. Prior to this, Honza initiated a series of informal lectures entitled "Genetic Methods in Zoology" for colleagues from a range of institutions. These lectures later became official teaching courses for Charles University in Prague and Masaryk University in Brno, where we now have the honour

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of "picking up the baton" and further evolving the subject in the future. Honza has educated, trained and advised around 30 students, many of whom went on to become respected experts in their fields. However, his educational activities extended beyond the Czech Republic as he has also acted as a dissertation reader and/or external examiner at universities in Switzerland, Sweden, the U.K., France and Germany. He authored or co-authored a number of student textbooks, including the second and third editions of Vertebrate Zoology (Academia, in Czech; together with Jiří Gaisler). In addition to more than 160 original research papers he co-authored several books such as The Atlas of European Mammals (Poyser Natural History 1999), Mammals of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East (A & C Black Publishers 2008) and Shrews, Chromosomes and Speciation (Cambridge University Press 2019).

From the very beginning of his scientific career, Honza was deeply involved in organisational and management activities, including the organisation or co-organisation of several international conferences. Even as a postgraduate student, he joined the organising committee of the 2nd International Theriological Congress in Brno (1978), which would, in his own words, "strongly influence his future career by allowing him to make a number of contacts with scientists from behind the Iron Curtain". Exactly a quarter of a century later, he organised the 4th European Congress of Mammology (Brno, 2003). During his life he carried on his shoulders the weight of dozens of administrative duties in miscellaneous scientific, supervisory and editorial boards or other committees, the most important being his appointments as director of the Institute of Vertebrate Biology, a member of the Academic Council of the Czech Academy of Sciences and the long-term Editor-in-Chief of Folia Zoologica. We always admired Honza for his ability to continue his scientific work in the face of such a heavy organisational and administrative load. Perhaps more important, however, was that Honza was above all, an upright, tolerant, fair and inspiring person. Both as students and subsequently, we enjoyed numerous informal meetings over a pint of beer, full of amusing stories, apt comments and valuable lessons. He never hesitated to make fun of himself and was an excellent raconteur and storyteller with an admirable sense of humour.

Although we were aware of his illness, the sad news of his death hit us like a bolt out of the blue. Honza was still working without restraint to the very end, to the point where no one could admit he might pass away. Unbelievably, with time running out, his work drive was actually increasing. He even refused to take painkillers in order to focus on finishing a number of uncompleted projects. As such, he was happy to see the publication of Vertebrate Zoology and this year's Shrews, Chromosomes and Speciation. Without his tireless work, these books would probably never have existed. For the upcoming update of The Atlas of European Mammals, he managed to prepare a sample chapter and had finished the manuscript for an extensive monograph on The Classification and Phylogeny of Mammals. Unfortunately, Honza will now never have the chance to see these works on the bookshelf.

We all miss him painfully.

Miloš MACHOLÁN & Josef BRYJA

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