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LUC DE VOS: IN MEMORIAM

8 December 1957–14 June 2003

Luc De Vos, a remarkable Belgian ichthyologist, died on Saturday morning, 14 June 2003 in Nairobi, Kenya. For some time he had suffered from kidney problems, and while being treated for a lung infection, his kidneys blocked and he soon passed away.

Tuur, as he was known to most people, started his career in ichthyology in 1979 in the Africa Museum in Tervuren (Belgium). He embarked on a systematic revision of the African Schilbeidae, a group of pelagic catfishes as part of his PhD programme under the supervision of Prof. Dr D. Thys van den Audenaerde. In 1984, after finishing his degree, he left the museum to work on the fishes of Rwanda in a collaborative programme with the Rwandese Institute for Scientific Research. He lived in Gisenyi at the shores of Lake Kivu for three years. There he married his wife, Clo, and started a family. In 1988, he joined the Belgian Technical Cooperation and became professor at Kisangani University in the Democratic Republic of Congo (then Zaire). He explored the Kisangani area and much further a field where few, if any, ichthyologists had sampled before, thereby collecting precious samples for the Tervuren Museum. His Congo years were, he always claimed, his best. In 1990, he and several others were repatriated because of the political upheaval in the country. Back in Belgium he was contracted by the Catholic University of Leuven until he got the chance to go back to his beloved Africa; this time to Burundi. He first headed the ichthyology team at the start-up of a new regional centre for hydrobiology (CRRHA) in Bujumbura and later on became the project leader. He stayed on even during times of political unrest but in the end had to return to Belgium in early 1996. During the next year he worked at the University of Leuven and at the Tervuren Museum.

In 1997 he joined the Flemish Association for Development Co-operation and Technical Assistance (VVOB) and left for Kenya to start up the Ichthyology Department at the National Museums of Kenya (NMK) in Nairobi, where he quickly became known as “Bwana Samaki”, which translates as Mr Fish. During his time in Kenya, he supervised several MSc and BSc students in their dissertations and lectured part-time on fish systematics to post graduate students in Hydrobiology at the University of Nairobi. Also memorable was the course on ‘Morphometric Data Analysis’, which he organised twice and which attracted scientists from the Fisheries Department, the Kenya Marine and Fisheries Research institute (KMFRI) and several universities. The ichthyological library at the department is one of the best in the region and largely the result of his efforts. Until the time of his death, he was the chairman of the editorial board of 'Samaki News', a magazine covering all aspects of fisheries and other aquatic living resources in the region, to which he also contributed a number of articles. He furthermore renovated the public aquaria of the NMK, which are now popular with both tourists and local visitors.

With some additional financial support, he managed to collect fishes in nearly every river system and lake in Kenya. He regularly hit the national and international press with his activities, such as the re-discovery of the giant pancake-headed catfish (*Clarotes tarabinii*) of which only one specimen was ever caught in a Somali river. He also took care of Kenya’s first coelacanth (*Latimeria chalumnae*) and was actually preparing a coelacanth exhibition for both the Malindi and Nairobi musea at the time of his death. As a sign of respect and appreciation, the National Museums of Kenya will dedicate these exhibits to his memory.

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Luc De Vos was an outstanding field ichthyologist and we look back with much pleasure on the sampling trips we did together. He published about seventy scientific articles and reports, 30 of which appeared in peer reviewed scientific journals. This is remarkable in view of the fact that he often stayed in places where literature or reference collections were scarce so that he had to build them up from scratch with every new project. To stay abreast in his field he usually spent a large part of his holidays in Belgium at the Museum in Tervuren.

Tuur's latest professional challenge was his East African Fish Diversity Project, which he had just started off. The aim was to bring together a group of East African ichthyologists to produce faunal lists and compile primary data on the fresh-water fishes of the region for the IUCN database.

Life has not always been easy for Tuur, but he continued in his own particular style, not taking everything too seriously. For those who have known him well, there are plenty of anecdotes to remember and smile at. Many have enjoyed his warm hospitality and NMK staff in particular will remember 'Bwana Samaki' for his kind, friendly and humble attitude. His work, he took very seriously. He practised ichthyology in a no-nonsense style and disliked articles and reports that made things look better than they were.

Tuur was 45 years young and is survived by his wife Clo Kayitesi and three children Nathalie, Joris and Hadi. He was a great colleague and a good friend, but most of all a genuine, good, warm and nice person.

Jos Snoeks and Elizabeth Akinyi-Odhiambo

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