

NARCIS MRŠIĆ (1951–1997) – IN MEMORIAM

From *Natura Croatica* to a member of its Editorial Board
On the 50th anniversary of his birth



Had the book of his days on Earth not been closed suddenly, in the prime of his life, during a period of significant scientific research and big plans, our late colleague and friend Narcis Mršić would this year be celebrating only his 50th birthday! But already three years have passed without him being among us. His memory lives in many of us who loved him and respected him. With these words, the journal *Natura Croatica* tries to make up for its failure and the fact that there was no *In memoriam* published immediately after his death (sometimes the Editor in chief should act on his own and not wait for others). May this retrospect, with the selection of his papers, serve to remind us of his dear, simple and hard-working person – on the 50th anniversary of his birth.

Narcis Mršić was born to a Croatian father and Slovenian mother. Narcis' parents Stjepan Mršić and Majda, née Herlec, were living and working in Rijeka. His mother went to visit her friend in Jesenice, where she gave birth to Narcis on August 2, 1951. He spent his childhood in Rijeka, where he finished his elementary and secondary education. He wanted to study biology, and since there was only College of Education in Rijeka, according to his father, they found a solution – Narcis went to live at his maternal grandmother's in Kranj, and from there he attended biology lectures at the Biotechnical Faculty in Ljubljana. Thus Narcis came to Slovenia, country of his birth, where he was to finish his studies, and where in the end he spent most of his life and strength. At the same time, because of his biological roots, it is no wonder that he remained a permanent link between Croatian and Slovenian biology. We know how much he gave to and what he represents to our friends, Slovenian people, but we also consider him to be our own »man from Jablanac« (according to his father Stipe Jablančanin (meaning »from Jablanac«), he loved Jablanac so much that he had planned to live there »in his old days«). In the

history of science there are many such cases. Two or more nations can be proud of their great men, and it does not have to be a loss to either of them. Every nation has such examples. Our Bošković was a Croatian, Italian, French, and even British scientist. Our Josip Pančić was both a Croatian and Serbian naturalist. Boris Zarnik is a Slovenian as well as Croatian biologist and university professor.

It can be said that Narcis Mršić was a natural born biologist. He was mostly attracted by zoology, especially reptiles. During four years he was working on the Mt. Velebit for his graduation thesis (»Reptiles of Velebit«), which he presented in 1975 at the Biotechnical Faculty of the University of Ljubljana. He was immediately (1975) employed at the Jovan Hadži Institute of Biology of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SAZU) and then he started intensive work on edaphic organisms. He spent 10 years working on phytocoenological mapping of Slovenian vegetation. But zoology was his calling, and he returned to it in his Master's and Doctorate thesis. He got his PhD degree in 1982, with the thesis »Taxonomic, coenotic and ecological research into earthworms (Lumbricidae, Oligochaeta) in the transects Mt Kranjska gora. – Mt. Špik and Preddvor – Mt Storžič.« at the University of Ljubljana. He was elected a research assistant that same year, then in 1988 a senior research assistant and 1993 a research fellow.

He published more than 140 bibliographical units, among them more than 30 scientific papers on lumbricids and 26 on diplopods. Among 11 monographs, one about the lumbricids of the Balkans and neighbouring areas was especially noticed in the world scientific community. In 1997 two of his books were published: *The Reptiles of Slovenia* and *Biotic diversity in Slovenia. Slovenia – the »hot spot« of Europe*.

Narcis Mršić was also an extraordinarily skilful illustrator. More than 2000 of his excellent drawings of Slovenian animals were published.

His most important scientific work is a great monograph about earthworms of the Balkans and neighbouring areas, a very significant zoogeographical and faunistic work. There he established that it is Slovenia that has the greatest concentration of biological species in relation to the size of its territory.

In his research into earthworms he thoroughly elaborated some parts of Croatia (Mt Velebit., Mt Kapela., Gorski Kotar, Mt Učka., Mt Biokovo) as well as some other parts of ex-Yugoslavia.

He also made his contribution to the knowledge of the taxonomy, zoogeography and ecology of the reptiles of Mts Velebit and Biokovo. He is considered to be the best expert for Croatian myriapods.

He received an award from the Boris Kidrič Fund for year 1988, and also a Golden Decoration of the the Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (ZRC SAZU) for year 1996.

Those who knew him well, after his sudden and premature death wrote about him some obviously very deeply felt words, and we shall convey some of them to our readers. I did not myself meet him a great many times. I would like to mention only two things. When I met him for the first time I was accompanied by a few of my colleagues, and as he entered, I was very impressed by the strength and warmth of the embrace with which he approached his colleagues and acquaint-

tances. My first impression was of a strong and passionate man, capable of giving himself and of gratefully receiving from others. The other time, the Editorial Board of Nat. Croat. asked him to be the referee for some manuscripts. Being strict, objective and constructive, he received from us two papers from the same author (who was anonymous, of course). He gave us a positive opinion on one of them, with some minor corrections, and recommended it for printing; for the other paper he wrote a short and concise explanation and found it unacceptable for printing. He gladly accepted our request to enter the international editorial board of our journal (1996); he wrote he would be honoured to help. And for us in *Natura Croatica* it was a great honour and pleasure to have him in the Editorial Board. Unfortunately he had a very short time to help us – a short time afterwards, on September 16, 1997, he died unexpectedly. He was also a member of other international editorial boards: Atlas of European Myriapods, Catalogue of Palearctic Myriapods, Atlas des Reptiles et Amphibiens d'Europe, and a reviewer for lumbricids and diplopods for *Miscellanea Zoologica*, Barcelona; for lumbricids for *Bios*, Thessaloniki; and for the International Foundation Programmes (Soros), Washington.

«He was a very cheerful person who used to spread good spirits and charm around him. We, his colleagues and friends, were always glad to see him. He knew how to listen to other people's troubles and exerted himself to help them solve their problems. His directness and optimism, and his creative power and immense energy were irresistible.

He loved his work – both research and teaching – he enjoyed it. A lot of his nights were dedicated to research work, when he sat with a cup of coffee and cigarettes, making drawings of tiny animals found during field work. He loved Slovenia and all the richness of species it possesses.

Today there is no more of his calming presence, which somehow made us self-confident. It still hurts us to think of the irreparable loss of a dear friend and man.

Narcis was an extraordinarily hard-working and systematic researcher. He was a person who somehow induced serenity and reliance. Even in some unpleasant moments he could make a joke and the world instantly became brighter. He was full of temperament and with it he could conquer the utter pessimists. His optimism was contagious. He described his endless professional as well as his life plans without any obtrusiveness.

For the loss inflicted by Narcis' death on his family and the scientific community, the only consolation lies in the fact that he lived his short life exactly the way he had wanted: giving himself to research and teaching, as well as to his loved ones. (Darja Mihelič, Annales 11/'97, 290)

In short, Narcis Mršič was a senior research fellow in the Jovan Hadži Institute of Biology of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SAZU), and lecturer for ecology and zoogeography at the Department for Biology of the Biotechnical Faculty of the University of Ljubljana. After only twenty years of work, he gained a great reputation in the fields of ecology, systematics, zoogeography and pedozoology, both abroad and in Slovenia, where he studied and was employed. While conducting comparative studies, it was obviously necessary to broaden millipede research (Diplopoda: Paradoxosomatidae) and include other parts of the world in it, so he took part in expeditions to Nepal (1978), New Guinea (1992) and

Indonesia (1993). The result was a discovery of some new taxa. Unfortunately, he did not have time to continue this complex research, and he also never lived to see his papers about it being published.

In the end of this retrospect to his memory, we shall quote some warm, humane and obviously very carefully chosen words of his colleagues, which we can read on the Internet:

For a lot of his astute ideas, he found the energy, courage, and time to handle all of them. His new, refreshing and surprising visions, and the perseverance in defending them, were not accepted by all his colleagues. As is the rule in most such cases, formal criticism of his scientific methodology or poor linguistic expressions was made, while the intrinsic values of his visionary announcements many times escaped notice. How should it not be! »A good horse ever raises the dust«, says an old Croatian proverb and the mode of Narcis' work was quite like that: to escape from the daytime nightmare he was overtaken by his night love, drawing...

For the ancient Greeks, a man of worth complies with four excellences: he must be clever, hard working, honest, and charitable. Narcis was. Yet, everybody has some problems with health. When the little mental wheels turn well, then the physical health uses to go wrong. Narcis had a heart condition, and he couldn't have made his way of life more likely to increase the risks: he was an extreme ergophile, addicted to the night, a heavy smoker and coffee consumer. He knew it. »You'll see«, he repeatedly reminded us in a sarcastic way with no sorrow in his voice, »one day my heart will break down«. And it did. But only his physical, anatomical heart.

We do miss him very much. (Tone Novak, Tatjana Čelik, March 2000)

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NB. There are numerous popular science articles, encyclopaedia texts, studies, handbooks and textbooks which he wrote alone or jointly with other authors, and that are not listed here. There are also none of the papers that were printed posthumously, dealing with the reptiles of certain parts of Southeast Asia. A complete bibliography is available at <http://www.izum.si/cobiss/>

Josip Balabanić
Marijana Vuković