



THE LIFE AND WORK OF METKA POVŽ (1944–2024), A LEADING SLOVENIAN ICHTHYOLOGIST

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Metka Povž (1944–2024) was a distinguished Slovenian ichthyologist whose career spanned over five decades, during which she authored more than 500 publications, both scientific and professional. Her work significantly advanced knowledge of freshwater fish in Slovenia and the broader Balkan region, with particular emphasis on species inventories and fish conservation. This paper reviews her major scientific contributions, including her role in protecting endangered native fish species, such as the preservation of pure populations of marble trout *Salmo marmoratus*, her research on non-native fish species, and her involvement in the protection of freshwater habitats. Her work remains a cornerstone in the field of ichthyology in the region and continues to inspire the ichthyological community.

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INTRODUCTION

Dr. Metka Povž passed away on 30 October 2024 at the age of 80 (Figure 1). Her passing was a tremendous loss to her family, as well as to all her colleagues, with whom she published almost until the last year of her fruitful life. The aim of this paper is to present Metka Povž's scientific career, with particular emphasis on her research contributions, which include more than 500 publications over 50 years of her active scientific work. Her achievements are considered outstanding within Slovenia and the wider Balkan region due to her dedication to fish conservation and commitment to knowledge dissemination. Furthermore, her work has gained international recognition through extensive collaborations, a recognised scientific profile, and the quality of her peer-reviewed publications.

This paper outlines Metka Povž's scientific contributions, highlighting key areas of her work:

- (i) fish inventory studies;
- (ii) fish conservation; and
- (iii) research on non-native fish species.

We have chosen to publish this tribute in the *Croatian Journal of Fisheries* in recognition of Metka's long-standing role as Associate Editor of the *Journal*, a position she held with dedication from the 2000s until the end of her life in 2024. Her work will serve as a valuable resource for future research, especially for members of the scientific community focused on fish biology and fish conservation, helping to carry forward her legacy.



Fig 1. Photograph of Dr. Metka Povž

1. Personal background and education

Metka Povž was born on 13 August 1944 in Ljubljana, Slovenia, where she attended the Valentin Vodnik Primary School (1951-1955) and the Real, Classical and Second Gymnasia (1955-1963). She completed her university education in biology and obtained the title of professor in 1971 at the Edvard Kardelj University – Biotechnical Faculty, University of Ljubljana, graduating under the supervision of Professor Boris Sket with a thesis on the freshwater fishes of Slovenia. Meanwhile, she worked as a technical collaborator at the faculty from 1969 until the summer of 1972, when she started her academic career as a junior research assistant at the School of Education of the National Institute for Biology, Ljubljana.

In summer 1977, she started working at the Fisheries Research Institute of Slovenia, where she remained until her retirement in 2003. In 1983, she completed her MSc studies at the Biotechnical Faculty, University of Ljubljana with a thesis assessing the threat posed to nase *Chondrostoma nasus* (Linnaeus, 1758) in the River Sava. In the summer of 1999, she obtained her PhD at the Faculty of Science and Mathematics, University of Zagreb, after presenting her thesis titled “Biological-Ecological Features of Danubian Roach *Rutilus pigus virgo* (Heckel, 1852)” under the supervision of Professor Stjepan Mišetić.

During 1984-1986, Metka was the first editor of “*ICHTHYOS*”, a scientific journal published by the Fisheries Research Institute of Slovenia. In 1991, at the E.B.I. Bioprogramm s.c.r.l. in Padova (Italy), she held the international course “Practical Methods for Biological Evaluation of Watercourses”. She also collaborated with non-governmental organisations (e.g. Society of High Dams SLOCLOD, Society of Ecologists of Slovenia), and was a co-founder and an honorary member of the Slovenian Native Fish Society (DPRS) since 2014. She was awarded bronze and silver plaquettes by Ribič magazine, published by the Fishing Association of Slovenia, and the first “Pionir” plaquette of the Slovenian Native Fish Society (DPRS).

After retirement, Dr. Povž continued to work enthusiastically at the same pace for two more decades. She took part in many surveys and research projects on a variety of freshwater fish species, contributing results for streams in Slovenia that she obtained during her time at the Fisheries Research Institute of Slovenia.

2. Professional background and legacy

Dr. Metka Povž's bibliography lists 502 entries published during her career. Many scientific papers and monographs deserve to be quoted here, especially considering the period in which they were published and the standards that Dr. Metka Povž effortlessly exceeded. This established her as a leading ichthyologist in Slovenia and a distinguished member among her colleagues in the former Yugoslavia. These works testify to the great passion and selfless effort that Dr. Metka Povž invested in research throughout her

long and fruitful career, which continued for more than two decades after her retirement from the Fisheries Research Institute of Slovenia.

2.1. Fish inventory of Slovenia

Among Metka Povž's most significant publications is the inventory of freshwater fishes of Slovenia, co-authored with her MSc mentor, Prof. Boris Sket (Povž and Sket, 1990). This work provides a comprehensive overview of Slovenia's freshwater fish species and serves as a foundational resource for the study of Slovenian ichthyofauna. It also highlights early collaborative efforts in fish research and conservation in the region.

More recently, she co-authored an updated monograph on the freshwater fishes and lampreys of Slovenia (Povž et al., 2015), which presents a detailed and current overview of all freshwater fish and lamprey species recorded in the country (Figure 2). The publication includes information on species identification, distribution, ecological characteristics, and conservation status. Special attention is given to native, endangered, and non-native species, with additional focus on habitat threats and conservation measures. This work has become an important reference for researchers, conservation practitioners, and environmental managers, contributing significantly to the knowledge and protection of Slovenia's aquatic biodiversity.

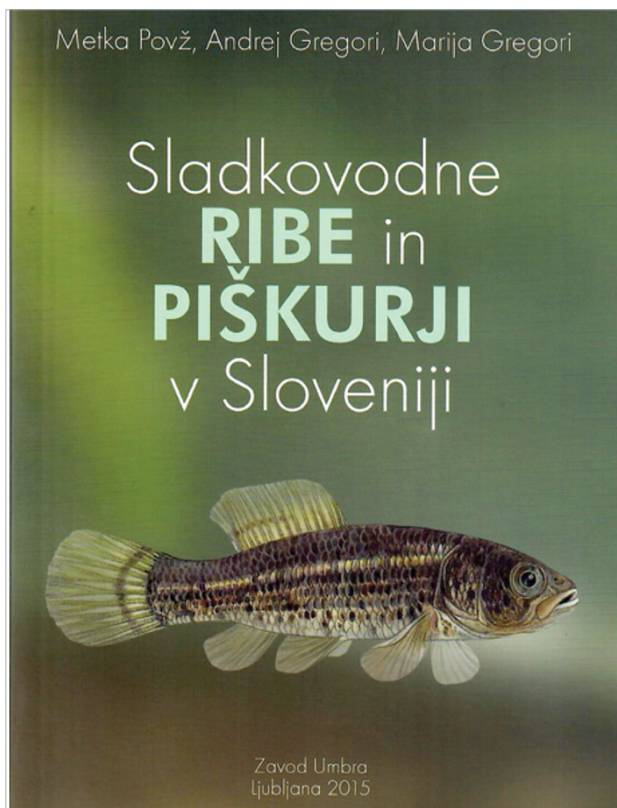


Fig 2. Cover page of the monograph on freshwater fishes and lampreys of Slovenia

In addition to her focus on native and endemic fish species (such as marble trout *Salmo marmoratus*, huchen *Hucho hucho*, and Danubian roach *Rutilus pigus*) and the growing threats they face, Metka Povž had a strong interest in the issue of non-native fish introductions in Slovenian waters. She recognised the need for effective control and management of these species to mitigate their impact on native fish communities. In response, she authored a dedicated publication on the inventory of non-native freshwater fishes in Slovenia (Povž and Gregori, 2014). This book documents the origins, pathways of introduction, ecological impacts, and current distribution of alien fish species in Slovenian waters. It highlights the threats posed by non-native species to native biodiversity, including competition, predation, and habitat disruption. Furthermore, the publication emphasises the need for ongoing monitoring and effective management of invasive species to safeguard native fish communities and aquatic ecosystems. Designed to inform both professionals and the broader public, it plays a key role in raising awareness and supporting evidence-based conservation strategies.

2.2. Fish conservation

Since the beginning of her career, Metka dedicated her scientific work to the study of native fish species, with particular emphasis on endemic fishes. By combining field surveys, taxonomic studies, and population assessments, she provided valuable insights into the effects of habitat degradation and hydrological alterations on native ichthyofauna.

She published numerous papers on the status and distribution of ichthyofauna in Slovenian watercourses of both the Danube and Adriatic river basins (Povž, 1983; 1984; 1987; 1991; 1994a; b; 1995a; 1996; 1997; 2002; 2011; Povž et al., 1990; Leiner and Povž, 1993; Leiner et al., 1995; Mrakovčić et al., 1995; Povž et al., 2006; 2016; Šumer et al., 2004; Simonović et al., 2015). In particular, she focused on several threatened fish species such as *Lota lota* (Janković and Povž, 1988), *Umbra krameri* (Povž, 1990; 1995b; c), *C. nasus* (Povž, 1983; 1995d; Penaz et al., 1995; Lusk et al., 1997; Povž et al., 1997a), Balon's Ruffe *Gymnocephalus baloni* (Povž et al., 1997b), Danube barbel *Barbus balcanicus* (Šumer and Povž, 1998a; b), Danube roach *Rutilus pigus* (Povž et al., 1998), Danube salmon *Hucho hucho* (Povž, 2005), marble trout *Salmo marmoratus* (Berrebi et al., 2000), sichel *Pelecus cultratus* (Sliškočič et al., 2019), and the genera *Cobitis* and *Sabanejewia* (Povž and Šumer, 2000; Šumer and Povž, 2000; Papoušek et al., 2008). Her research has significantly contributed to the understanding of the ecological requirements, threats, and conservation needs of these species.

One of Metka Povž's most notable contributions was her work on the protection of the genetic integrity of *S. marmoratus*, which was threatened by hybridisation due to the widespread stocking of Danubian and Atlantic brown trout *Salmo trutta* lineages. Genetic analyses conducted

in the main Soča River Basin in Slovenia revealed only five nearly pure populations of *S. marmoratus*, confined to the headwaters of five tributaries (Berrebi et al., 2000). These five locations formed the foundation for a future marble trout rehabilitation programme that resulted in preserving and restoring the species' genetic purity and natural habitats (Berrebi et al., 2022).

Furthermore, her work informed national and international conservation strategies, and was instrumental in developing action plans and legislative measures for the protection of endangered freshwater fish species in Slovenia and the broader Danube and Adriatic basins (Šumer and Povž, 2002; Povž, 2003; Povž et al., 2003; Kosi et al., 2015). In addition, she made significant efforts to highlight the importance of fish passages and the restoration of migratory routes for migratory fish species, particularly Danube salmon *Hucho hucho* (Povž, 2005; Kolman et al., 2010; Marčič et al., 2014). She was among the first experts in the Balkans to draw attention to the threat posed to migratory fish by the widespread construction of hydropower plants and the ineffectiveness of fish passes (Povž, 2003; Povž, 2005; Šumer and Povž, 2009).

2.3. Non-native fish species studies

In conjunction with conservation efforts, she studied the impacts of fish introductions and translocations since the early 1980s (Povž, 1982; Povž and Ocvirk, 1987; 1988; Honsig-Erlenburg et al., 1999; Copp et al., 2005; Povž, 2006a; Povž and Šumer, 2006; Piria et al., 2018; Povž, 2018). Her early work focused on silver crucian carp *Carassius gibelio*, documenting its distribution and ecological impact in Slovenian waters (Povž, 1982). Over the following decades, she systematically researched and published on a broad spectrum of non-native freshwater species introduced into Slovenian aquatic ecosystems. These included the invasive pumpkinseed *Lepomis gibbosus* and topmouth gudgeon *Pseudorasbora parva*, whose adaptability to various habitats and life history traits was studied in detail and resulted in highly cited peer-reviewed publications (Šumer et al., 2005; Povž, 2006b; Povž, 2007a; Gozlan et al., 2010; Gozlan et al., 2020). Furthermore, she studied other introduced species such as largemouth bass *Micropterus salmoides*, mosquitofish *Gambusia affinis*, North American catfish *Ameiurus* sp., and African catfish *Clarias gariepinus* (Povž, 2006b; c; Povž, 2007b; c; d).

Through a series of illustrated articles in *Ribič: glasilo slovenskega ribištva*, she not only disseminated scientific findings but also raised awareness among stakeholders in fisheries and the public about the ecological risks of non-native fish species introductions (Povž, 2006b; c; Povž, 2007a; b; c; d; e; f; Povž and Prezelj, 2007; Povž, 2008a; b; c). These efforts contributed significantly to the national understanding of invasive species dynamics, with emphasis on their morphology, habitat preferences, and potential threats to native biodiversity.

In addition, she assessed the invasion risk of introduced species in Slovenia using a risk screening tool (Piria et al., 2016; Radočaj et al., 2021), in collaboration with the late Dr. Gordon Copp (1956 – 2023) (Vilizzi and Tricarico, 2025; Vilizzi and MacNeil, 2025). She also made a significant contribution to the unification of terminology in the Slovene language within invasion biology (Copp et al., 2021), thereby making a lasting contribution to this scientific discipline.

3. Tributes from scientific peers

P.S.: As a beginner and apprentice in ichthyology, I was fortunate to meet Dr. Metka Povž at the Second Symposium of Biosystematics of Yugoslavia in Gozd Martuljak in 1989, to be her guest in Ljubljana several times afterwards and to have very interesting discussions about our common science - fish biology, as well as about the principles of scientific work, academic standards and life in general - even about women's basketball that she actively played. She maintained an active friendship with her fellow basketball teammates, even later in life, after her active sports career ended. I remember each of our encounters as easy-going, enlightening and fulfilling, so I was deeply shocked to learn of her passing. Since then, I often recall those moments with a mixture of grief and gratitude, feeling fortunate to have had her as a gracious colleague and true friend.

M.P.: I had the opportunity to meet Metka shortly after her retirement, initially through our work on the editorial tasks of the *Croatian Journal of Fisheries*, and later through collaboration on joint publications. She was a passionate ichthyologist who welcomed me into her home, where she enthusiastically presented her ichthyological collection. She generously shared her data and was deeply committed to ensuring that her findings did not remain in a drawer but were published and made available to the broader scientific community, as well as for science popularisation. Our collaboration resulted in the publication of eight joint peer-reviewed papers, the last of which was published in 2021. During one of our most recent in-person meetings, she told me: "At last, someone with whom I can talk about fish has visited me." This sentence has remained deeply etched in my memory and serves as a powerful reminder of her passionate dedication to the conservation of ichthyofaunal diversity — one of the most endangered components of global biodiversity due to increasing pressures on freshwater ecosystems. Although I was deeply saddened by the news of her passing, I feel honoured to have known such an exceptional individual and devoted colleague.

ŽIVOT I RAD ISTAKNUTE SLOVENSKE IHTIOLOGINJE Metke Povž (1944.–2024.)

SAŽETAK

Dr. Metka Povž (1944.–2024.) bila je istaknuta slovenska ihtiologinja čija je karijera trajala više od pet desetljeća, tijekom kojih je objavila više od 500 znanstvenih i stručnih radova. Njezin je rad značajno unaprijedio znanje o slatkovodnim ribama u Sloveniji i širem balkanskom području, s posebnim naglaskom na popise vrsta i očuvanje ribljeg fonda. Ovaj rad daje pregled njezinih najvažnijih znanstvenih doprinosa, uključujući njezinu ulogu u zaštiti ugroženih zavičajnih ribljih vrsta poput očuvanja čistih populacija glavatice (*Salmo marmoratus*), njezina istraživanja stranih vrsta riba te angažman u zaštiti slatkovodnih staništa. Njezin rad predstavlja temelj u području ihtiologije u regiji i nastavlja inspirirati ihtiološku zajednicu.

Ključne riječi: publikacije, zaštita riba, slatke vode, ostavština, Balkan

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