

COMMENTARIES

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY AND BIBLIOGRAPHY OF LATE FELIX P. AMERASINGHE

W. R. Breckenridge

13/B/16/2, Forest Reserve Road, Hantana Housing Scheme, Kandy.



F. P. Amerasinghe, who died on the 7th of June, 2005, at the comparatively young age of 57, was the first occupant of the newly created chair of Applied Zoology in the Department of Zoology, University of Peradeniya. At his demise he was the Principal Researcher and Leader, Water Health and Environment Theme, International Water Management Institute (IWMI) headquartered in Colombo, and overseeing the global research programme related to this theme. With his death the scientific community has been deprived of an inspiring and exemplary teacher, researcher, administrator and communicator.

Felix Prashantha Amerasinghe was born on the 14th of July, 1948, the youngest child of Cuthbert and Effie Amerasinghe. His father was the Professor of Western Classics in the University of Ceylon, and he grew up in a home which provided the ideal environment of play,

conversation, books, music, and a general awareness giving an all round education at home, the importance of which Sir Ivor Jennings, Peradeniya University's first Vice-Chancellor, repeatedly emphasized that "the student who has a happy and intellectual home environment gains advantages he never loses".

Felix Amerasinghe had his primary and secondary education at St. Anthony's College in Katugastota, a leading catholic boys' school in the Kandy district, where he had an excellent academic record. Clearly then, his home and school environment laid the foundation for his brilliant career as a student, University teacher, researcher as well as for his other interests and activities where his many talents were displayed.

He entered the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya, in 1967 and graduated with first class honours in Zoology in 1971. He was appointed Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Zoology in 1972. He then won an open Commonwealth Scholarship in 1974 for post-graduate study in the United Kingdom during the tenure of which he worked in the University of Bristol with L. Strong, the eminent insect physiologist, on pheromones and sexual activity in the desert locust *Schistocerca gregaria*. Amerasinghe returned to Sri Lanka in 1977 on obtaining his doctorate, and continued to teach and research in the Department of Zoology moving steadily up the academic ladder. He was away from the University for two years (1990-92) when he was visiting Associate Professor, Department of Entomology in the University of Maryland, U.S.A. He returned to the Department in 1992 and taught there until 2000, leaving as Professor of Applied Zoology to take up an appointment with the International Water Management Institute.

Teaching came naturally to him with his grasp of and enthusiasm for the subject, together with his fluency in English and Sinhala. He set high standards for himself and his students, which was very evident to those who worked with him. He taught Invertebrate Zoology, Comparative Animal Physiology, Entomology

(including insect physiology, taxonomy, insects and health) to students in the General and Special Degree programmes. But, as was expected of teachers in the Department of Zoology, your reading and interests in zoology were to be broad and not confined to your own speciality of teaching and research. Amerasinghe subscribed to this view fully in theory and practice. His teaching extended to courses at post-graduate level and science education.

His departure from the Department, of which he was Head from 1998-99, was an irreplaceable loss for he was an excellent teacher and research supervisor, a team player, with a disciplined attitude to his profession.

His research in Medical Entomology, substantial and influential, was recognized internationally. A clear indication of his perspicacity in anticipating future research of significance in Sri Lanka was his switch from strict insect physiology to the applied field of mosquito taxonomy and ecology with its ramifications with vector biology, epidemiology of mosquito-borne diseases associated with irrigation and water-retaining systems in the urban and rural environments of the South Asian region. He became the recognized expert in this area of research as reflected in the key position he held at his demise. The linking of biodiversity and conservation to irrigation, agriculture and disease was a dynamic and innovative concept promoted by Amerasinghe, a reflection of a keen and perceptive mind which saw as the lateral connections in specific goal-oriented research.

Amerasinghe had 87 publications in several peer-reviewed internationally recognized journals dealing with tropical diseases (particularly malaria), medical entomology, mosquito systematics and vector biology, natural history, and general zoology. The publications represent an impressive and very comprehensive body of work, and to pick out individual papers would not do justice to the whole. The list speaks for itself. The taxonomic studies and identification of anopheline and culicine mosquitoes in Sri Lanka and the reports on different aspects of the local mosquito fauna in relation to water management and disease are particularly relevant.

There are 70 published abstracts of papers presented at conferences, workshops, and scientific meetings held in Sri Lanka and abroad, covering similar areas of research. Amerasinghe published chapters in two books and co-authored an important book on malaria in Sri Lanka.

He was a keen and knowledgeable naturalist from his school days, and in this impressive list of publications are three papers dealing with the identification of the hairs of mammals of Sri Lanka, the food habits of the leopard, and his very first publication - as joint author - on the histology of the alimentary tract of some Ceylon primates in correlation with diet.

His professional affiliations were many, some of which are: Fellow of the National Academy of Science and Fellow of the Institute of Biology, Sri Lanka, Fellow of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, President (Section D) – Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Science (Malaria and its control: an Asian perspective was the title of his Presidential address.), Member of the Entomological Society of America and the American Mosquito Control Association. He was also Chairman of the Board of Study in Science Education of the PGIS, Peradeniya, and Director of the Science Education Unit of the University of Peradeniya. He served the National Science Foundation as Chairman of its steering committee in Biological Sciences, as a member of the committee of the Zoological Survey of Sri Lanka, and on the editorial board of its journal.

Amerasinghe's expertise in the interrelationship of environmental issues, biodiversity, vector biology, and human health was recognized and appropriately used in his appointment as consultant for WHO/FAO/UNEP and the Sri Lankan Government Ministry of Health on several assignments and projects in Sri Lanka and abroad.

He supervised the research of a number of students and by his example showed them the exacting and exciting sides of scientific investigations. His graduate students will always remember him with gratitude.

Many awards and honors, as befitting his work, came his way. He is listed in the first edition of the 2000 outstanding scientists of the 21st century, published by the International Biographical Centre, Cambridge, England; Research Bonus Award for 1999 by H. E. The President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka for excellence in research publications; Gold Medal of Extra-mural activities by the University of Peradeniya as Director of the Science Education Unit in 1995; Sir Nicholas Attygalle Award and Wilson Peiris Memorial Award of the Sri Lanka Medical Association in 1999 and 1998 respectively, jointly with his co-workers. His scientific versatility and contributions were further

recognized as two recent occasions. Firstly, at the launch of the IUCN publication on the fauna of Sri Lanka, which book was dedicated to his memory; the second was a symposium (held on 28 August, 2006, in Colombo) on Water, Health and Environment in honor of his life and work, at which Professor Frank J. Rijsberman, the Director General of IWMI, presided.

Amerasinghe was not an 'all work and no play' type. He found time for his other interests such as music, singing, and amateur theatricals and drama.

His disciplined attitude to work and 'no-idling' stance was combined with an infectious sense of humour and camaraderie at work. Students, colleagues, and research collaborators benefited from his knowledge, expertise, and guidance. The lack of a robust constitution did not deter him from extensive travel and work in less than congenial surroundings. Latterly, with failing health, he continued to work from home until at the end,

"the provinces of his body revolted

the current of his feelings failed: he became his admirers".

He is survived by his wife Priyanie (also an established researcher), son Chandima and daughter Niranjali.

Selected Publications

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