

All,

On behalf of his closest colleagues, we are saddened to inform you that the marine mammal community has lost one of the true pioneers in our field with the passing of Ronald J. Schusterman on February 11th 2010. Many of you either knew Ron personally, especially if you liked to dance and have a good time at conferences, or through his outstanding contributions to many areas of marine mammal science, most notably sensory systems and cognition. Ours is a young and rapidly growing field of study, but Ron was part of a small, and, sadly, declining number of “pre-Act” marine mammal researchers who laid the foundations for our Society’s current appreciation of marine mammals, the passage of the Marine Mammal Protection Act in 1972, and the foundation of what was to become the Society for Marine Mammalogy, of which he was a founding member.

Ron was a native of New York City, specifically the Bronx, and proudly cherished his Big Apple heritage throughout his life; anyone who knew him quickly detected the unquenchable brash exuberance of a true New Yorker. After serving in the U.S. Army, Ron attended Brooklyn College, where his interest in psychology was kindled by Professor Mort Feinberg. After graduating from Brooklyn College, Ron, on the recommendation of Feinberg, began graduate studies with Winthrop Kellogg at Florida State University, where Ron received his Ph.D. in 1961. It may surprise some folks who knew Ron as a marine mammal scientist, and know of Winthrop Kellogg from his work on dolphin biosonar, that Ron went to work with Kellogg to study primates. Ron maintained a lifelong interest in primatology, especially gibbons and chimps, and was remarkably conversant with the literature on primate behavior, cognition and development. Like Bill Mason, his friend and famed primatologist who studied howler monkeys, Ron could produce startlingly realistic calls of gibbons, howler monkeys and other primates. His skills produced dramatic effects, both on his students and the resident primates, during field trips to the local zoo and to the UC Davis Primate Center.

Ron did not transition into marine mammal studies until recruited to the Stanford Research Institute by Tom Poulter and Kellogg. Poulter was a well-known scientist and adventurer, having rescued Admiral Byrd during Byrd’s famous Antarctic overwintering expedition in 1934. Poulter was trained as a physicist and served as Byrd’s meteorologist, but he had become convinced that seals and sea lions possessed echolocation capabilities like those that had only recently been discovered in dolphins. Poulter hired Ron to help him prove that seals had sonar. He had not reckoned with Ron’s meticulous thoroughness as a researcher, nor Ron’s profound capacity for rigorous critical thinking. Ron, through a series of incisive and ingenious experiments, was unable to find a specialized sonar sense in seals or sea lions, though he did discover very intelligent animals with remarkable visual, auditory and cognitive capabilities that were sufficient to account for the behavior of these remarkable marine predators, even without active echolocation. In spite of considerable certainty by Poulter that biosonar must be there somewhere, Ron stood by his work, which led to some storied battles at what Ken Norris referred to as the “Poultergeist” meetings at Stanford Research Institute – annual gatherings of the small marine mammal scientific community in the late 1960s and early 70s that eventually led to the current biennial conferences. The search for specialized sonar capabilities in seals and sea lions continues, as it should – in science negative findings are never taken as proven – but it is a testament to Ron’s unequalled scientific skills that no one else has been able to find what Ron could not find 45 years ago.

Ron continued to focus on both sensory biology and cognitive capabilities of marine mammals, first at Stanford Research Institute, then at California State University at Hayward (now Cal State East Bay), where Ron held joint appointments in the Psychology and Biology Departments and co-taught one of the first Marine Mammal Biology courses with Sam McGinnis, beginning around 1972. In 1985 Ron moved his research program to Long Marine Laboratory at the University of California, Santa Cruz where it continues as a strong, vital center of pinniped sensory and cognitive research under the very capable direction of his former student and beloved colleague, Colleen Reichmuth.

Ron's nearly 50-year career in marine mammal science was overwhelmingly productive, with pioneering work in many different areas of sensory perception and learning. Ron is also extremely well known in the field of Comparative Psychology for his experimental work on language learning and the foundations of complex cognition in animals, as well as for studies of mother-offspring bonding during early development and into adulthood, and studies of reward expectancies and contingencies in children, non-human primates, and marine mammals. Many in the community may know that he used his extensive knowledge of conditioning and learning theory to develop some of the first, most creative, and most enduring approaches to training marine mammals in captivity. He was a founding member of the Society for Marine Mammalogy, and an Honorary Fellow of the Animal Behavior Society, the Acoustical Society of America, the American Psychological Association, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and just a few months ago, he was inducted into the California Academy of Sciences. Ron had just completed a historical perspectives article for Aquatic Mammals that will be posthumously published in the next issue of that journal.

Perhaps even more important than the hundreds of papers, books, articles, lectures, and honors was the effect on the field he had through the students he mentored and colleagues he helped, too numerous to mention individually. Ron leaves a profound legacy in the form of a very close-knit family of colleagues, spanning multiple generations and disciplines. He influenced many of the most productive scientists in our community. We share in common the enduring imprint of an exceptional scientist and a compassionate optimist who was also a passionate lover of music, art, and baseball, dancing and dining with good friends, and of course, a zealous observer of the behavior of all creatures. Ron will surely be deeply missed by many, but his contributions will continue to enrich our science and our lives.

Ron is survived by his wife Francie, his daughters Marisa, Nikki, and Lesli, his beloved grandchildren, Danielle, Max, Nacho, Alyssa, and his grandchildren by marriage, Isabella, Shawn, and Talia. A small funeral service was held in Santa Cruz, California on Monday the 15th of February, 2010 and a celebratory memorial is planned for Sunday the 28th of February in La Selva Beach, California - all are welcome! Additionally, several memorial funds are being established in his honor. For more information please contact: info@pinnipedlab.org.

Brandon Southall
Bob Gisiner
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