

TRIBUTE

Victor Quesnel: The passing of an environmental icon

ON December 22, 2014, Trinidad and Tobago lost an extraordinary individual with the passing of Dr Victor Quesnel — so extraordinary that two eulogies were required to tell his life story. One of these is presented here (abridged) and was prepared by Yasmin Baksh-Comeau.

I have the privilege and honour this morning to pay tribute to Victor C Quesnel on behalf of the TTFNC. This was an overwhelming and emotionally touching assignment. Where to begin and what to exclude from this conversation was quite a dilemma! Nevertheless, I will attempt to briefly encapsulate 55 years of the immeasurable contributions of a rare and endangered species today; that of a gentleman and a scholar.

The TTFNC was founded in 1891 but went into decline in the 1930/1940s. When Victor returned home from his studies abroad in 1953, he revived the club and the club's natural history journal — the *Living World* as we know it today. He served on the management committee as Honorary Secretary in 1954 until 1959 and again in 1980-1981, as President from 1986-1988 and periodically on the editorial committee of the *Living World* journal for over 24 years. He was the club's representative on numerous national and NGO committees.

The *Living World* (LW) journal is one of the signature publications of the club, where Victor's legacy is branded ad infinitum with the insect on our logo, which is the Inca beetle. The subspecies found in Trinidad is



VICTOR QUESNEL (right) leads the line in Nariva Swamp in April 2003. PHOTO COURTESY THE TTFNC.

Inca clathrata quesneli, named after Dr Victor Quesnel.

To most members of the club Victor was the consummate or quintessential naturalist par excellence. Dr Elisha Tikasingh, one of the club's respected elders and scientist, who also served until recently as Editor-in-Chief of LW provided me with this summary of Victor's publications and I quote:

He has written at least one article in every issue of the journal from 1956 to 2008. He told me then he was not going to write anymore until he got a computer. However, he did produce one more article in 2012 jointly with Dave Stradling which was actually initiated by Stradling...

How many of us have ever bothered to look at a commonplace tadpole, far less look into its eyes? Dr Quesnel was the first in the world to recognise the phenomenon of cyclorotating eyes in tadpoles, based on observations of a

local tree frog. This is one example of an internationally influential paper, published in 1956.

Similarly his joint paper (2009) on Anolis lizards entitled "The persistence of *Anolis trinitatis* as a naturalised lizard in Trinidad against hybridisation pressure with *Anolis aeneus*" is an astonishing example of continuity in research efforts, as it refers back to the 1959 paper on two sibling species of anoles in Trinidad. Dr Quesnel must be one of very few researchers to have published on the same topic 50 years apart — an example of a rare continuity of research effort. Here is another spin on Victor's research from Professor Chris Starr who never succeeded in ruffling Victor's feathers!

"He was a consummate amateur naturalist. Now, some of you might say 'But wait, how can you call someone with a PhD in science an amateur

naturalist?' Victor's doctorate was in plant physiology and biochemistry, and he published 12 papers relating to the physiology and biochemistry of fermentation in cocoa beans, yet he was happy doing original research in topics far from his thesis, topics in which he had no more formal qualifications than any of us..."

Victor's publications are well-cited by the international research community and will continue to be so for posterity. It is not surprising that in order to be such a prolific writer Victor kept detailed field notes. These notes are compiled into 42 volumes of notebooks which in themselves are a valuable resource. These notebooks were handed over by Victor to me and my colleague Professor Adrian Hailey, in the Department of Life Sciences at UWI (The University of the West Indies) with the understanding that they will be published in the near future with Victor Quesnel as the senior author....

But what about Victor the gentleman? To the general membership of the club he was an inspiration and role model. He was deeply respected and held in high esteem for his passion to research, document and conserve the islands' rich biodiversity. He was a mentor who encouraged the younger members of the club to take up leadership positions by serving on the management committee, contributing their observations to the *Living World* journal or leading special interest groups. On a personal note I have known Victor since 1978. He persuaded me to join the Club in September 1980

and nominated me to become the first female President of the club in 1990. He was a true friend, a mentor and an integral part of my family, where he shared his love for reading and western classical music, particular the violin which he mastered. He once coached our son in his violin exam pieces which earned him a distinction that year. He happily accompanied us to see our fledglings in concert. I believe, subject to correction, somewhere in his library there are sheets of music scores of his Unfinished Symphony.

He frequently teamed up with me and/or my late husband Paul Comeau on countless botany field trips in the company of a wide range of visiting scientists to the herbarium. His affable, soft-spoken, gentle, good natured, humble disposition made us all feel at ease in his company.

His strong Christian ethics would quicker "turn the other cheek" than "go for the jugular". The nearest thing to an expetive I have ever heard from Victor was "Oh shoots" and one of his most remarkable qualities for me was his ability to "suffer some fools gladly".

Farewell Victor. You will be dearly missed. Thank you for the memories. May your soul rest in peace.

Today's feature was prepared by Yasmin S Baksh-Comeau, Curator, National Herbarium of TT. For more information on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@ttfnc.org or visit our website at www.ttfnc.org.

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