

Obituary for Victor B. Scheffer, Ph.D.

(27 November 1906–20 September 2011)

It is with fond memories and a touch of sadness that we write of the death of Victor B. Scheffer. He died in Washington State on 20 September 2011, surrounded by family (see Mapes, 2011).

Victor B. Scheffer was born in Manhattan, Kansas. He earned a Ph.D. from the University of Washington in 1936 and was hired as a biologist for the U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey in 1937. During this time, in his first experience with marine mammal research, Vic was asked to lead an investigation on the population dynamics of northern fur seals in the Pribilof Islands. From 1944 to 1952, he headed what is now the National Marine Mammal Laboratory in Seattle, Washington. In 1958, Vic's first book, *Seals, Sea Lions, and Walruses: A Review of the Pinnipedia*, was published. He became the first chairman of the Marine Mammal Commission when it was created in 1972 as a result of the Marine Mammal Protection Act that was passed that same year.

In a time when it was considered uncommon and bold, Vic was a strong proponent of animal ethics and conservation, fighting against the killing of fur seals for pelts. Several of his books, including the *Year of the Whale* (1970) and the *Year of the Seal* (1972), helped to bring the plight of marine mammals to the forefront of biology. In total, Vic has more than 284 publications to his name, including 29 books. In 2008, at 102 years young, Vic wrote *Aquatic Mammals'* inaugural Historical Perspectives Series essay.

He is considered to have been one of the first marine mammal biologists as well as a great author, photographer, lecturer, and conservationist. He was a naturalist in every sense of the word and delighted in the wonder of our natural world.

An excerpt from his Historical Perspectives essay follows:

Concern for Posterity

Henry Steele Commager has written, "Posterity is a word that has disappeared from our vocabulary. As far as I know, no modern president has used it in any presidential address, though in the Era of Enlightenment, Washington, Adams, and Jefferson couldn't give a speech or write a letter without invoking posterity." In our time, presidents are



becoming less and less presidential. Their vision rarely extends beyond eight years.

Concern for posterity is the uncalculated sentiment that leads elderly folk to plant acorns or to endow museums and wetland sanctuaries. It is the sentiment that inspires care for endangered species. In its pure form, it is selfless, for it benefits those who can never reciprocate.

Concern for posterity is closely related to the conviction that human life has purpose. I mean purpose in the everyday lives of individuals, not some grand cosmic purpose that must lie forever beyond the reach of our animal brains. Individuals find purpose through personal choice or invention. Some create art; others search for new planets, build bridges, serve the community, or simply do—as Orwell (1935/1950) puts it—"what is customary, useful and acceptable." Yet even those who give little thought to the purpose of life can feel compassion for those men and women who will someday inherit the earth.

As a career student of organic evolution, I feel that the most satisfying purpose of life is to think and to act in ways consistent with the idea of the "perfectibility of man" (as Alexis de Tocqueville [1835/2000] puts it). This is a goal that, like the square root of minus-one, is unattainable though useful. I envision a better world—one in which men and women will steadily fine-tune the civilized habits that protect individual rights within the constraints of democratic law. In that utopian world, men and women will celebrate the singularity of *Homo sapiens* as an organism that is

evolving at an incredible rate compared to other species. It is the freest among all other forms in its potential to adapt to changes in its environment. It is the only species that might think its way to survival in the event of a global catastrophe such as a hit from a giant asteroid. A poet might say that we should feel concern for the future of humankind if only as a perpetual source of astonishment.

Literature Cited

- Mapes, L. V. (2011, October 20). Naturalist also served as *BirdNote* adviser [Obituary for Victor B. Scheffer]. *The Seattle Times*. Retrieved 28 October 2011 from http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2016564612_schefferobit21m.html.
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