

OBITUARIES

Colin Groves: Taxonomist, conservationist, friend and teacher

Born: 24 June 1942

Died: 30 November 2017

Tribute by Alison M Behie

School of Archaeology and Anthropology, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia, 2600

email: Alison.behie@anu.edu.au

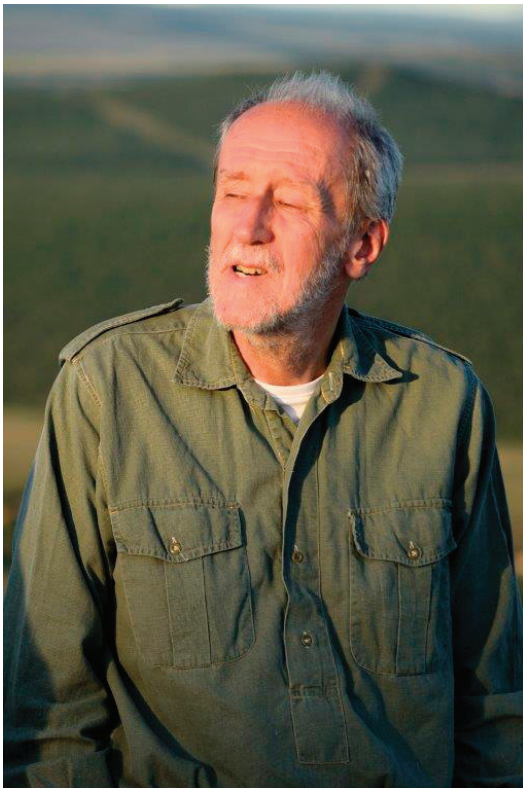


Image courtesy of *Hajarimanitra Rambeloarivony*, photo taken in South Africa, 2014.

Colin Groves was undoubtedly one of the greatest anthropologists, primatologists and taxonomists of our time. This is not only because he never faltered in the face of the taxonomic impediment, which resulted in the casting aside of more traditional taxonomic approaches when identifying species, but because he challenged us to understand that “More and more, the work of taxonomists and other biologists must be put at the service of conservation”. It was a viewpoint that not only pushed Colin’s work and stimulated taxonomic debates and decades of research but led to his constant support for conservation NGOs around the globe. I saw this first-hand watching him speak at Wildlife Asia events around Canberra as well as through the establishment of Colin’s Primate Conservation Endowment at ANU to help students conduct conservation research.

The loss of this great man in November 2017, saw the world lose both an amazing taxonomist, and one of the most supportive mentors, teachers, colleagues, and friends to ever walk among us. Survived by his dear wife Phyll and their extended family and friends, the loss of Colin has been felt across the globe.

Born in London, Colin grew up with a love and curiosity about the animal kingdom stemming from a book his grandfather gave him. This passion was further fuelled by his family’s travels and his frequent trips to the London Natural History Museum as a teenager. With a growing love of Zoology, Colin wanted to study this at University, but his father preferred linguistics. They settled in the middle and Colin pursued an Anthropology Degree at University College London. After graduating in 1963, he commenced a PhD under the supervision of John Napier at the University of London where his doctoral research on gorilla skulls revealed for the first time how gorilla skeletal morphology varied in response to environmental conditions; challenging our perceptions of how biology and environment are connected [1–3]. Upon completing this PhD work, Colin undertook a two-year postdoctoral fellowship at The University of California, Berkeley and then a fixed term appointment at Cambridge University. In 1974, he accepted a position at The Australian National University (ANU) that resulted in him and his partner

Phyll, moving to Canberra, Australia, where the rest, as they say, is history.

Over his eminent career at ANU, Colin produced more than 200 peer-reviewed publications and eight books that challenged the way the scientific community thought about taxonomy and species conservation. He also helped to name more than 50 species, including species of rats, civets, possums and most recently a new species of orangutan (*Pongo tapanuliensis*) [4]. Along with Vratislav Mazák he named a species of human ancestor, *Homo ergaster*, in 1975 [5] and in recent years he was heavily involved in debates surrounding *Homo floresiensis*. Despite his status and how much work he always had on the go—he never let a student or colleague email go unanswered—he responded to everyone and responded with encouragement. This sort of generosity and kindness did not go unnoticed or unappreciated with Colin inspiring hundreds of researchers across the globe to study primatology and to think long and hard about how best to conserve the world’s threatened species. Colin’s work enthused us and as a result he was frequently invited to speak at conferences including the African Genesis symposium in Johannesburg (January 2006), the International Primatological Congress (August 2012), and the International Conference on Ruminant Systematics and Evolution (2014). He has also been bestowed many honours including: Membership of the New York Academy of Sciences (1995), Fellowship in the Australian Academy of Humanities (1998), a Lifetime Honorary Membership to the American Society of Mammalogists (2013), a Conservation International Award for Primate Conservation (2014) and a posthumous Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Society of Primatology (2018). Perhaps one of his greatest legacies though is that shortly before his death he had two species of monkey named after him; *Cheirogaleus grovesi* a dwarf lemur in Madagascar—and *Plecturocebus grovesi*, a Titi monkey in the Southern Amazon. Phyll was able to communicate the news confirming these new species with Colin before he passed and ever the humble man, he was surprised but happy.

Colin’s field-work adventures, which started in his PhD and continued nearly until the end of his life, were some of his favourite times and I and countless others were often happily regaled by his

stories. Some of the most memorable included those where he was chased by lions, a herd of banteng and a rhinoceros. Travelling to museums and national parks around the globe, allowing him to study hundreds of species of animal, including every species of rhinoceros, which was one of his greatest personal achievements. This love of rhinoceros may have started when he researched them as an undergraduate, but it certainly continued throughout his life. This would be apparent to anyone who entered the Groves’ home and noticed the vast collection of rhinoceros paraphernalia crowding the shelves and walls. This is something very special to me as well, as after his passing each of my three children were gifted one rhinoceros and one gorilla stuffed toy from Colin’s collection. As these sit on the shelves of my kids’ bedrooms I am regularly reminded of Colin and the way he impacted all of us through is generous spirit and true desire to be a teacher. I remember having dinner at his house and having him take my daughters behind his desk and show them books and statues and casts of all sorts of animals. Thoughtfully answering questions and telling stories. I know I am not the only one with such memories, and while there is no doubt his loss has been felt far and wide in the scientific community, what those of us that knew him miss the most is our friend.

Vale Colin. Not a day goes by where your loss is not felt.

References

- [1] Groves CP. 1967. Ecology and Taxonomy of the Gorilla. *Nature* 213:890–893.
- [2] Groves CP. 1967. The Nomenclature of the Eastern Lowland Gorilla. *Nature* 215:1172.
- [3] Groves CP. 1970. *Gorillas*. London: Arthur Barker.
- [4] Nater et al. 2017. Morphometric, behavioral and genomic evidence for a new Orangutan Species. *Current Biology* 27:3487–3498.
- [5] Groves CP and Mazak V. 1975. *An approach to the taxonomy of the Hominidae: Gracile Villafranchian Hominids of Africa*. *Cas Pro Min Geol.* 20:225–247.
- [6] McLain AT, et al. 2017. A New *Cheirogaleus* (*Cheirogaleidae: Cheirogaleus crossleyi* Group) Species from Southeastern Madagascar. *Primate Conservation* 31:27–36.
- [7] Boubli JP, et al. 2019. On a New Species of Titi Monkey (Primates: *Plecturocebus*) Byrne et al., 2016), From Alta Floresta, Southern Amazon, Brazil. *Molecular Phylogenetic Evolution.* 132:117–137.