

DR. COURTENAY NEVILLE SMITHERS 1925-2011
A TRIBUTE

David Britton, Australian Museum

Courtenay Smithers was an entomologist who was a Curator and Deputy Director at the Australian Museum.



Dr Courtenay Smithers

Photo: Carl Benton, Australian Museum

Childhood

Smithers was born in South Africa in 1925. His family migrated to England in 1938 after his father died in 1934. His earliest career choice was that of a professional soccer player, but his schooling and the impact of the war meant that his interests turned to natural history, and he spent much of his spare time watching birds and collecting insects.

War and South Africa

He served in the British Army from 1943, arriving in France on D-Day, 6th of June, 1944. He was taken prisoner shortly after that, and was not released until 1945. He wasn't discharged from the Army until 1947, and after that he went back to South Africa to

study at the University of Pretoria under a South African Government sponsored grant and loan scheme, where he studied Agriculture, with entomology and botany as his major subjects. After two years there he changed universities and went to Rhodes University in Grahamstown to further his studies in entomology, eventually finishing with a Masters degree in the early 1950s.

Although he wanted to continue on to do a PhD, he decided it would be better to go out and work for a few years and return to study later. He had no problems finding work, as Rhodes University was at that time recognised as having one of the best

entomology courses in the world. His first entomological job was with the Rhodesian Government researching the Tsetse fly problem. He was stationed in the remote area of the Zambezi Valley, but after nine months he moved on to work at the Wattle Research Institute back in South Africa. After 18 months or so he moved back to Rhodesia where he joined the Entomological Branch of the Department of Research and Specialist Services in Southern Rhodesia. It was here that he developed an interest in the insect order Psocoptera (commonly called "bark lice"). These insects are mostly unknown to the general public, with the exception of a few domestic wingless pests such as book lice, which are atypical of most species. There are hundreds of species that occur in natural habitats, and most of them were completely unknown to science. It was in Rhodesia that he met his future wife Smila, and the two of them became expert collectors of bark lice, and Smithers developed a strong taxonomic knowledge of the group.

Australia

Whilst working in Rhodesia Smithers applied for jobs in Australia, and received an offer from the Australian Museum for a curatorship in entomology. The previous curator (Anthony Musgrave) was still in office, but was due to retire in a couple of years, but passed away prematurely whilst Smithers' job offer was in the mail between Australia and Rhodesia. Smithers and Smila came to Australia in 1960 and he took up the post of Curator of Insects at the Museum. At this stage the job encompassed curation of many other groups, such as spiders, centipedes and scorpions, so Smithers found himself having to get up to speed with the Sydney funnel web spider amongst other things.

The early 1960s were a good time to be working at the Museum as there was a push to improve the collection storage and facilities in the institution. John Evans who was the director at this time was determined to lead the Museum out of the era of cobwebs and sealing wax, and encouraged Smithers to initiate a strong program of collection expansion including wider use of the research collections by both Australian and overseas researchers.

The pinned entomology collection was then housed in a cramped medley of old cabinets of varying sizes and non-uniform drawers, and was extremely difficult to work in. One of Smithers' first innovations in his position was to come up with a design for a modular cabinet that allowed workers to move specimens freely between different parts of the collection without risking damage to the fragile dry insects.

These cabinets were housed in new storage areas, and are still in use today.

Smithers' research also thrived during this period, and he spent much time doing extensive field work throughout Australia to develop the collection in his research areas. One of his early trips was an arduous three month trip to Cape York and surrounds. His fascination with bark lice continued. Most of the Australian fauna of these insects was at the time unknown, and Smithers' taxonomy encompassed the fauna from other parts of the Southern Hemisphere and he began to better understand the links between the fauna of South Africa and South America, and how Australia's unique fauna has evolved over time. In particular, his research work in the 1970s with Ian Thornton and Tim New on the psocid faunas of the Melanesian arcs of Pacific islands led to a much more sophisticated and detailed understanding of the biogeography of this part of the world.

This was enhanced by a solid exchange and loan program with other researchers such as Thornton and New, and with institutions all over the world. As a legacy the Australian Museum now has the best developed bark louse collection in the Southern Hemisphere, and certainly one of the best in the world.

He also maintained that a strong connection between the public and Museum scientists was important, both for obtaining useful information, and for the public to have a better understanding of the role of a natural history museum. Smithers always was an approachable person, and his broad knowledge and communicative skills no doubt influenced many keen natural historians. Examples include "Australian Insects in Colour", published in 1972 and co-authored with photographer Anthony Healy, and "The Young Observer's Book of Australian Butterflies" published in 1982. In addition to this he published book reviews and popular science articles as well as speaking to many different groups of people on subjects such as bee-keeping, insect conservation and butterfly migration. His legacy of communication with the public is still a crucial part of the public profile of the Museum.

He had a strong interest in conservation of biodiversity. He was pivotal in helping establish a national park on Norfolk Island, and in 1972 purchased 500 acres land outside of Singleton which he and Smila set up as a wildlife refuge.

Another project that attracted a lot of public attention was his research into migration patterns in wanderer butterflies. Courtney instigated a program where

volunteers tagged the butterflies, and contributors in New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria recaptured tagged butterflies and sent back specimens and data on butterfly movements. Many people from non-science backgrounds found themselves engaging in how the science works, and in understanding the biology of insects.

The Australian Museum Director in the 1960s was John Evans who was also a prominent entomologist. He encouraged Smithers to attend and have input into the International Congress of Entomologists held in 1964 (London) and in 1968 (Moscow). Smithers was then appointed as organising secretary for the 1972 hosting of this congress in Australia in Canberra, and helped put the role of entomologists in Australia and the Australian Museum well and truly into the spotlight.

Another notable role of Smithers in promoting the growth of entomology in Australia was the initiation of a push to create a national entomological society. When he first arrived in Australia there was no national society, but a disparate set of state societies catering for both professional entomologists and amateur enthusiasts, and he thought it was odd that given the quality and quantity of research that there was no national forum for these scientists. In 1961 there was a meeting in Sydney of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS), and Smithers with permission from the organisers put a slip of paper notifying people of a meeting to discuss the possibility of a national society. This generated a large amount of interest, and eventually the Queensland Entomological Society and ANZAAS took up the baton, and two years later the Australian Entomological Society was a reality. Without this it was doubtful whether the International Congress would ever have been held in Australia. Smithers was

President of the Society for two consecutive years. Smithers was always proud that he had a key role in instigating the national society, and this was also reflected in part by him being granted Honorary Life memberships to the Australian Entomological Society (1983), and to the Entomological Society of New South Wales (1984).

In 1967 Smithers also took on the role of Deputy Director at the Museum, and at one stage was doing this job, plus running the Entomology Department, and being Secretary for the International Congress Organising Committee. As well as this, he was awarded his PhD from Rhodes University in 1972, for a world revision of the higher classification of the bark lice. After stepping down from the Deputy Director position he continued on as Principal Curator until his retirement in 1985. Smithers never thought retirement from the his position had anything to do with stopping his research, and he continued researching and publishing on bark lice, scorpion flies, butterflies and lacewings right up until 2010. Amongst many notable publications 1967 he published a world catalogue of the Psocoptera, was co-author of another world catalogue in 2002 and he wrote the chapters on Zoraptera and Psocoptera for the landmark CSIRO publication “Insects of Australia” in 1970. He was the author or co-author over 280 articles, books and chapters in books, with his last manuscript on bee-keeping being sent to the publisher literally days before he passed away. Outside of his contributions to the knowledge of insects Courtenay was a friend and mentor to many, and a gentle person who will be greatly missed not just by the entomological community, but by many others interested in the world of natural history. He is survived by his wife Smila and his sons Graeme and Hartley.

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