



Wild Lands Advocate 12(5): 8-9, October 2004

Wildlife Scientist Devotes Rich Life to Educating the Public

Andy Marshall

Valerius Geist warned two decades ago that the Alberta government's proposal for game ranching was wrong, scientifically and economically. For years, he suffered insults, shunning and even death threats as he publicly noted the errors of the government's ways.

When the biological disaster of chronic wasting disease and the collapsing markets for elk meat and velvet finally forced many ranchers to slaughter their stock and shut shop, vindication was complete but not to be savoured.

"It's not a joy to be right," he says from his Vancouver Island home, which he has shared since 1995 with his wife of 43 years, Renate, and where he continues his never-ending defence of North American wildlife.

In sharp irony, Geist is prepared to serve as a witness for the game farmers, who once so reviled him, in their class action against the Canadian government for its role in this travesty.

"I only asked people to do their homework, which the government didn't do," Geist, 66, explains. "Unfortunately, this is becoming a feature of North America – how much knowledge there is and how little governments pay attention to it."

An ability and willingness to bridge detailed scientific knowledge with public policy debate are a hallmark of this courageous yet gentle scientist who enjoyed a remarkable and broad-based 27-year career at the University of Calgary and who is still professor emeritus of Environmental Science.

"As a tenured professor, I felt a certain responsibility to the public to speak up on matters, no matter how much my heart was fluttering," he says.

The rolling "r" and clipped accent are testimony to 10 years as a boy growing up in Austria and Germany. He was born in Nikolajew by the Black Sea, in the then USSR, but moved in 1943 with his parents, both engineers specializing in marine architecture (his mother worked on submarines and icebreakers).

Recalling his time as a teenager attending high school in Regina – he came with his family to Canada in 1953 – he says at that early age he devoured scientific treatises to feed an almost unquenchable passion for reading and acquiring new knowledge that has characterized his life ever since. "I became interested in large mammals, particularly mountain sheep, very early," he says.

"Val has this incredible ability to see both the big picture over the long term at the same time as he's able to delve into intimate details of specific issues," says his long-time Calgary friend Darrel Rowledge, constantly at his side during the game ranching battle. "I've never encountered a professor with such graciousness," Rowledge adds. "He was willing to go way out of his way to teach people the background to issues."

This drive to share knowledge with fellow scientists and with the public at large in an accessible way led to Geist writing numerous articles in popular and scientific journals and at least 16 books, two of which sold more than 100,000 copies and seven of which he describes as coffee table books.

His books have received several awards, and Geist has many personal honours, the most recent being





the 2004 Olaus Murie Award from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. In November he will receive an AWA Alberta Wilderness Defenders Award.

When he first entered the U of C's Environmental Science department, the push was on for more interdisciplinary research, a trend Geist embraced with gusto. "It was right in my line of thinking," he says. "Gaining knowledge in new disciplines is always rewarding ... it was a great adventure in discovery."

With a BSc in zoology and a PhD in ethology from the University of British Columbia, Geist did extensive post-doctoral work at Seewiesen, Germany before ending up in Calgary.

As part of his interdisciplinary approach, Geist taught graduate courses in environmental science and human biology, in particular how to maximize health environmentally. A second line of teaching and research centred on policies for wildlife conservation and large-mammal biology. Courses he taught for undergraduates have ranged from ethology, ecology and evolution to wildlife management.

His first book in 1971 on mountain sheep won a Wildlife Society book-of-the-year award and was released in Japanese. Other books have dealt with bighorn (a children's book), mule deer, elk, buffalo (an award winner), deer of the world (honoured in France), moose, antelope and whitetail. The ideas in a 1978 book called *Life Strategies, Human Evolution, Environmental Design: Toward a Biological Theory of Health* have also held up well.

"As a professor being paid ultimately out of the public purse, I have gone out of my way to write something for the general public," Geist says.

Particularly relevant to AWA have been his efforts for wildlife conservation. He is anxious to remind people to appreciate that the conservation model established early in the twentieth century by the U.S. and Canadian governments has done wonders for wildlife populations.

Principles that protected public ownership of wildlife and that prohibited the marketing and the killing of wildlife for frivolous reasons, together with the managing by government of wildlife based on sound science, brought numbers back from the disastrous declines inflicted by early settlers during the previous century.

"Our system of conservation has been gloriously successful," he says with customary enthusiasm. But recent public policies, particularly in Canada, are in danger of undermining the progress.

The game ranching adventure was, of course, a prime example where those principles were ignored. Alberta's move toward closing off public grazing leases also privatizes wildlife, Geist explains. "Wildlife is being treated as private property – that's where we're heading right now," he says. "Handing over public land for private hunting will be the destruction of our North American model of wildlife conservation."

The provincial and federal governments have slashed research positions for wildlife, thus abandoning the ongoing search for the necessary scientific knowledge. "We need strong institutions dealing with wildlife," he says. He calls the policies in national parks "a bloody disaster." He decries the destruction of so many bears because of habituation. "We have to keep the bears afraid of humans ... the bears are better off being hunted."

Still passionate about hunting – he recently shot a bear in the northern part of Vancouver Island and relishes the sausages and other meat he gained from it – Geist sees hunters as the best motivated of all the population to maintain wildlife numbers and preserve natural habitat. That's why closing off Alberta's public lands to them will be so harmful.





In his multi-disciplinary approach, Geist introduces economics into the discussion. For example, the annual economic benefits from wildlife viewing and hunting are estimated at \$110 billion US in North America.

Ironically, at a time when Canadian public policy threatens wildlife, other countries are looking at adopting the North American model. Geist's dream is for an international treaty to enshrine the tried-and-true conservation principles.

Rowlage points to Geist's "huge presence on the international stage." As with another internationally acclaimed scientist, water expert and University of Alberta professor David Schindler, the provincial government holds him in similar disdain, he says.

In the meantime, Valerius and Renate tend to the turkey, geese, rabbits and other livestock on their beautifully located 20 acres. Two streams intersect the property, and "I can listen to the bears catching the salmon," Geist says, joy in his voice. Although the pace of work has slowed somewhat, he maintains contact with the world through the Internet.

In his scientific fervour, he has experimented with growing 14 varieties of grape. "I am deeply into brewing. It's great, great fun," he laughs. He has also revived an earlier interest in music, playing the guitar and taking up singing again.

Among conservation projects he would like to be remembered for, Geist recalls his role in changing policies for preserving mountain sheep by moving them into habitat where they could better survive. Previously that was not considered a good idea, but, says Geist, "my contribution to the debate was a matter of clarification." Some 25 years later, mountain sheep numbers had soared by 50 per cent. He celebrated the result in a 1991 book called *Return of Royalty*.

This is just one of many successes in Val Geist's rich life to be celebrated.

