

IN MEMORIAM

Valerius Geist 1938-2021



We are fortunate to be able to publish two tributes to Dr. Valerius Geist who passed away earlier this year, one by AWA's Vivian Pharis and one by Shane Mahoney, the CEO of Conservation Visions and the Deputy Chair of the IUCN's Sustainable Use and Livelihoods Specialist Group. Dr. Geist received a Wilderness Defenders Award in 2004 and gave AWA's annual lecture in that same year.

Vivian wrote:

AWA prides itself as being science-based in its positions and campaigns. Bolstering this pride have been generous Alberta university professors who've willingly given of their help

and time. Among these, Dr. Val Geist was for decades, AWA's chief adviser on wildlife issues. For example, for decades AWA presented the logic and science to Alberta authorities about the follies and downright insanity of introducing and supporting game farming. Our stand on this key issue was developed in concert with the world's best adviser on the topic, Dr. Val Geist. Val carefully crafted his stand against domesticating wildlife based on years of his own research, and on his commitment to the North American model of wildlife management where public ownership is foundational.

Similarly, Val helped AWA to build its arguments on other wildlife issues like the need for a publicly developed Wildlife Policy for the province. More specifically, he helped us to protect herds of bighorn sheep from human encroachment, particularly the ski developments at Mt. Allan and the open pit coal mines at Caw Ridge near Grande Cache, both on prime sheep habitat. Losing great Alberta

scientists like Drs. David Schindler and Valerius Geist leaves many of us feeling empty for their wise counsel.

Shane Mahoney wrote:

On July 6, 2021, SULi and the wider conservation world were saddened to learn of the passing of well-known Canadian scientist Dr. Valerius Geist, a pioneer in the field-based study of large mammal ecology, and a celebrated author, educator, wildlife advocate, hunter and friend. Dr. Geist was 83 years old and died in Port Alberni, British Columbia. He will be missed and remembered by an inordinately wide network of friends, students and colleagues around the world. A man of rare intellectual capacity, Valerius Geist possessed an infectious energy and optimism, as well as an extraordinary kindness and willingness to engage. His curiosity was insatiable and his capacity for work, simply astounding. But most of us who knew and admired him will forever best remember his great and unyielding humanness, his warmth and embracing smile. He was a rarely gifted man and it was a rare privilege to have known him well.

Among many other achievements, Valerius Geist was originally and perhaps best known as the foremost expert on the biology, behavior, and social dynamics of North American wild sheep, though his research and detailed writings covered an extraordinary spectrum of large mammal biology and also a wide range of topics relevant to human evolution, socio-biology and conservation science. The latter included detailed studies of environmental design, theories on human ecology, health and the origins of art, ungulate breeding behaviour, taxonomy and diversification, carnivore behaviour and predator-prey relationships, and numerous, wide-ranging aspects of wildlife management policy and practise, perhaps most notably on the disease risks and conservation perils of game ranching.

Known to many as the “Professor Doctor,” Geist was recognized internationally for his ground-breaking scientific research, his voluminous published works, his insightful conservation philosophy, and for his outspoken views and advocacy for science-based wildlife management. He was the leading authority on the North American Model of Wildlife

Conservation, and was, in fact, the first to use this term to refer to the unique and shared institutional approach to wildlife management policies in Canada and the United States. He first articulated the Model’s core principles in the early 1990s.

Born in Nikolayev, USSR, on 2 February 1938, and raised in Austria and Germany, and then emigrating to Canada as a teenager in 1953, Dr. Geist held both an honours B.Sc. in zoology (1960) and a Ph.D. in zoology (1967) from the University of British Columbia. His doctoral thesis, *On the behavior and evolution of American Mountain Sheep*, was supervised by famed Canadian ecologist, Ian McTaggart-Cowan (1910-2010).

In 1961, Valerius married Renate Geist, nee Brall (1937-2014), a talented biologist and deep intellectual in her own right who provided the English translation of multiple volumes of Grzimek’s *Animal Encyclopedia*, a near “bible” for every zoo in the world. They had three children together, Rosemarie, Karl, and Harold.

In 1967, the family travelled to Germany where Dr. Geist had been awarded a postdoctoral fellowship at the Max Planck Institute for Behavioral Physiology and where he studied under Nobel Laureate Konrad Lorenz (1903-1989), one of the founders of modern ethology. In 1968, the Geists returned to Canada and Dr. Geist accepted an assistant professorship at the University of Calgary, Alberta. He remained with the University of Calgary for nearly three decades and would go on to become a founding member and first Program Director of Environmental Science in the Faculty of Environmental Design and, later, an Associate Dean. In 1994, he officially retired and was awarded the position of Professor Emeritus of Environmental Science. The remainder of his life was spent in Port Alberni, British Columbia, where he and Mrs. Geist devoted their time to gardening, animal husbandry and endless discussions with friends, neighbours and colleagues. That period, up until Mrs. Geist’s death in 2014, were indeed golden years, and their home was a rare bastion of warmth, hopefulness and grace.

Over the course of his career, Valerius Geist authored or co-authored 23 books; 7 policy

reports; more than 150 peer-reviewed papers, book chapters, and commentaries; over 50 entries in 19 encyclopaedias; more than 130 popular article and book chapters; and more than 30 book reviews. His curriculum vitae reflects an extraordinary life of work and accomplishment. His first book, *Mountain Sheep: A Study in Behavior and Evolution* (1971) won both the Wildlife Society’s 1972 Book of the Year Award and the Alberta Achievement Award. Subsequent books were awarded the Alberta Society of Professional Biologists’ Peggy Thompson Award (1995 & 1996); the Saskatchewan Award for Publishing (1996); the Mid-America Publishers Association’s Best Nature/Environment Book First Prize (1997); and both the International Council of Game and Wildlife Conservation’s Technical Writing Prize and Culture Prize (1998 & 1999). In 2004, he won the Wilderness Defenders Award from the Alberta Wilderness Association.

A dedicated hunter and strong proponent of sustainable wildlife use as a conservation mechanism, Dr. Geist was a Professional Member of the Boone and Crockett Club, as well as a member of the International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation. He believed that with active wildlife management and care, humans could not only safeguard but enhance the biodiversity and productivity of ecosystems. He was a revolutionary intellectual force and a tremendous teacher, embracing new ideas, challenges, and successes with equal vigour. He will be remembered not just for his academic brilliance, but for his larger-than-life personality, his relentless curiosity, his bold outlook, and his incredible capacity to give of himself – to share his knowledge, his insights, and his courage with others. He was one of the greatest zoologists of modern times, of that there can be no doubt. He was also an irreplaceable mentor and friend. His legacy will live on in the ideas he gave us and the lessons on humanity and nature that he taught. (Shane’s tribute appeared originally on the IUCN’s Sustainable Use and Livelihoods Specialist Group webpage: <https://iucnsuli.org/index.php/2021/07/30/valerius-geist-1938-2021/>)