

Dr Charles Santiapillai (1944-2014)



Dr Charles Santiapillai was born on May 12, 1944 in Kayts in the Jaffna peninsula, Sri Lanka, to a humble Christian family. He died at the age of 70, on October 29, 2014. His early education was completed in his hometown, Jaffna, at the Holy Family Convent. He then went on to receive his secondary education at St. Patrick's College, Jaffna. Upon graduating from St. Patrick's College, he was admitted to the Faculty of Science of the then University of Ceylon (Peradeniya) in 1965. In 1969 he graduated with a B.Sc. Honours Degree in Zoology, and in the following year, on the strength of his performance at the honors degree program, he was recruited to the staff of the Department of Zoology as an Assistant Lecturer. He pursued his graduate studies at the prestigious University of Southampton, England, and earned his Doctorate in Zoology in 1976. Upon his return to the Department, he was promoted to the post of Senior Lecturer in Zoology, and continued his service there until 1984, when he was awarded the post of Senior Scientific Officer of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Asia Program, based in Indonesia. He worked for the WWF until 1992, and returned to the Department of Zoology in Peradeniya where he resumed his academic duties.

In 1995, he was promoted to the post of Associate Professor in Zoology, and continued to work in the Department of Zoology in Peradeniya until his retirement in 2009. It was during this period that I became closely acquainted with his work, first as an undergraduate in the Department of Zoology, University of Peradeniya, and then as an assistant lecturer. He was known to us as 'Dr Charles' or simply 'Charles Sir'. I still remember his first lecture delivered to us, when we were in our General Science qualifying year. It was not on elephants, his field of expertise, but on crocodiles! Students soon found his style of lecturing extremely interesting and amusing, as well as thought provoking, and hence after only two or three more lectures, even our fellow students following courses of other disciplines were tempted to sit in his lectures just for the fun of listening to him! His first lecture to us on elephant biology still haunts in my mind, and I have a vivid memory of that lecture even today! I remember how he talked about 'EAE' (Elephant Arse Erosion), when he was explaining the bad side of elephant trenches. He would tell us how the elephant would sit on the edge of the trench and how it causes EAE! Not only would he explain it

in words, but also enact it himself! The whole class could not help bursting out laughing!

During his career, Dr Charles Santiapillai was untiring in his research on elephants and other large mammals and their conservation. For his work on conservation, he received the Gold Medal from HRH Prince Bernhard of The Netherlands, and was appointed the Knight of the Golden Ark by HRH Prince Bernhard at the Soestdijk Palace, Baarn, The Netherlands, on June 29, 1990. In 1998 he was listed as one of the 243 Environmentalists by the WWF's "De Wereld van het Natuur Fonds". In the following year, he was awarded the First Place in Science Popularization Awards in Sri Lanka. For three times, in 2001, 2003, and 2005, he received the Presidential Award for Research published in peer-reviewed journals. In recognition of his research and service towards the conservation and management of elephants and other large mammals in Sri Lanka, on November 14, 2005, the President of Sri Lanka conferred upon him the prestigious National Award of Vidhya Nidhi ("A Mine of Science"), which is the highest honor a scientist will receive from the President of the country.

Dr Charles was a well-educated and well-read academic. His writing style, which delighted the reader always, was unique among the academics not only in the Department of Zoology, but also in the whole University. I have been privileged to have co-authored with him several monographs and research papers. He was the proud owner of a personal library with many rare volumes, of which some of them I am certain only he possessed in the entire country. Not only he himself was an avid reader, but also he encouraged his students to cultivate this rewarding habit. Whenever a new book on southern Asian birds was published, he would encourage me to have a personal copy. From 1987 to 2006, he was the editor of *Gajah*, the journal of the IUCN/SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group, and from 1998 to 2006, he was the Deputy Chairperson of this group. At the time of his death, he was the Country Coordinator for the joint Rajarata University of Sri Lanka and Ringling Brothers Center for Elephant Conservation Program in the U.S.A.

He has been the author of 47 research publications in peer-reviewed journals, 64 research publications in international journals, 21 research publications in local journals, 17 books and book-chapters, 13 edited proceedings, 99 short communications, 14 book reviews, and 43 international meetings, symposia, and conferences. Dr Charles Santiapillai was an eminent figure in the conservation of elephants not only in Sri Lanka but also worldwide.

At the time of his death, he was an Adjunct Professor of Biology at the Darr School of Agriculture, Missouri State University, U.S.A. and an Adjunct Professor of Zoology at the Faculty of Applied Sciences, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka.

Soon after my graduation I had the opportunity to work very closely with Dr Charles in his researches on elephants. Dr Charles, Shanmugasundaram Wijeyamohan, another student of him, and I traveled to elephant inhabiting areas in his white double cab and studied on elephants on a regular basis. After almost every elephant counting trip, he was sure to enjoy a cold beer with us. I remember him to say, "Nothing like a cold beer after a tiresome field trip". During these research trips, he would dazzle us with his endless jokes, for he had a very great sense of humor. He would take us not only to elephant areas, but also to other remote areas in the North and East, at a time when the war was still going on, to do research on the bird life. Dr Charles was my supervisor when I was in my final year as an undergraduate, doing my research project on birds. He, having seen my interest in birds, encouraged me to study the ecology of birds for my undergraduate research project, as well as for my graduate studies, and ever since I have been working in this field. When I was an undergraduate student, he used to call our Zoology Honors student batch which consisted of two girls and myself, 'one big parrot and two budgerigars'. This 'one big parrot' was none other than me! Whenever we had questions, the three of us were always welcomed in his office. In front of him, we never felt uneasy or scared! He was a kind-hearted man, and his office door was always open to his students. Just two months before his death, he would sit in my office in the Department of Zoology (which happened to be his own office when he served there!), and chat with me about the good old days in the Department. By his sudden death, we not only lost a great scientist, a world-renowned conservation biologist and an elephant ecologist, but a humble man and a wonderful academic. He was the most memorable teacher we had ever known in our entire university life. I feel most privileged to have been his student.

(I am grateful to my friend Shanmugasundaram Wijeyamohan, for providing me with some necessary biographical data and the photograph).

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