

## OBITUARY

### VICTOR ROBERT “VIC” SIMPSON 1941 – 2018

The otter community has lost a special member with the passing of Vic Simpson. Vic died on 31 July 2018 after a long struggle with cancer.



Victor Robert Simpson, BVSc, DTVM, FIBiol, HonFRCVS was a passionate wildlife pathologist and a tireless and meticulous scientist. He devoted most of his life to understanding health problems and causes of decline of wildlife species in UK, providing scientific bases for their conservation.

Vic has been special to many of us as individual and he has been truly special to the Otter Specialist Group as he has shown what a significant contribution veterinary science can make to the knowledge and conservation of otters.

Vic Simpson obtained his BVSc at Bristol University in 1964 and gained a Diploma in Tropical Veterinary Medicine at Edinburgh University a few years later. During the early and late seventies he worked in Africa, where he studied various arthropod-born viruses affecting both domestic livestock and game animals, in particular bluetongue. The years spent in Africa were an important tile in the mosaic of Vic’s life.

On returning to the UK, Vic began his long career with the Veterinary Investigation Service of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF), which spanned 30 years. The Service was organized as a network of “VIC”s (Veterinary Investigation Centres). Vic worked at the Polwhele VIC near Truro, in Cornwall. One of the major functions of the VICs is to conduct surveillance for livestock diseases in their locality. However, Vic didn’t limit himself to investigating diseases of domestic species: he made a number of studies on conditions affecting wild vertebrates, in particular mute swans, otters, bats and marine mammals. Later he studied also red squirrels, finches, auks and several other wild species.

Vic recognized that Britain does not have a Department of Wildlife or any other government organization appointed to investigate the health and diseases in wild animal populations. He was lifelong committed to fill this lack and when he retired

from MAFF in 2001, he celebrated his “retirement” by setting up a centre to study wildlife health problems: the Wildlife Veterinary Investigation Centre in Truro (Cornwall), the first VIC for wildlife ever established in UK.

The Wildlife VIC, which run on a no-profit basis, has been (and is) an exemplary centre at European level, not just in Britain. By setting up the Wildlife VIC and through his studies, Vic showed the important role of veterinary pathology as a part of the conservation disciplines. In practice, this meant that he made the best pathology research available for the conservation of threatened species. For example, his research on mortality of mute swans in the Trent River contributed to the banning of lead shot s weights in angling. Contaminant analysis of otters reinforced the case for banning organochloride insecticides, like dieldrin. His research on stranded cetaceans revealed that about 80% of the dolphins examined died in trawls. Recently Vic coauthored a paper supporting the hypothesis that naval exercises can cause dolphin mass stranding events.

The conservation organizations and specialist groups were main supporters of Vic and conservationists were Vic’s closest friends. The Wildlife Trust's Otter Group brought Vic road casualties for post-mortem since ‘80s and the Somerset Otter group has sent otters to Vic up until 2007. The Wildlife VIC operated as part of Cornwall Wildlife Trust and it became a collaborative partner in the Garden Bird Health Initiative in 2004.

Vic’s research was naturally collaborative and it couldn’t be otherwise. Vic was a friendly and kind person, always keen to exchange opinions and share knowledge. He had links with the Departments of Veterinary Pathology in UK universities, the Zoological Society of London and the Health Protection Agency. The Wildlife VIC had valuable support from colleagues of the Veterinary Laboratories Agency.

In one of Christmas Newsletters of the Wildlife VIC, Vic wrote “*There would be little point in doing this research if the results were not made publicly available*” and he put this into practice every single day by untiringly attending conferences, often as an invited speaker, writing reports or publishing cutting-edge papers.

Vic’s research was outstanding and internationally recognized. He received several awards during his life; of those, the most important and recent were: recognition from the British Veterinary Zoological Society and the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons; the Dalrymple-Champneys cup and medal, the most prestigious scientific award for contribution to the knowledge of pathology of wildlife species from the British Veterinary Association in 2011; the Mammal Society Award for Outstanding Services to Mammalogy and the Emeritus Award from the Wildlife Disease Association received in 2016.

Vic has been an excellent teacher and a mentor for many. He trained a number of vet students aspiring wildlife pathologists during nearly 20 years at the Wildlife VIC.

### **Vic, Otters and the OSG**

Vic examined nearly 900 dead otters from late ‘80s to 2011. About half of otter post-mortems was done at WVIC under a contract of the Environment Agency until 2007 and later on a completely voluntary and non-profit basis.

A meticulous gross pathology examination and histopathology of tissues enabled Vic to identify diseases of otters that have never been documented before in UK, to detect trends in mortality problems, and to evaluate possible mechanisms through which polychlorinated pollutants could have contributed to the otter decline.

He was the first to discover cholecystitis in UK otters caused by the digenean fluke *Pseudamphistomum truncatum*. He found that septic bite wounds from

intraspecific aggression can be a direct cause of death in Eurasian otters and noticed that intraspecific aggressions increased over a fifteen years period possibly as a consequence of increased competition for resources in recovering otter populations. He described the first case of Tyzzer's disease in an otter cub. He suggested an index to evaluate abnormalities in adrenal glands that can be indicative of poor body conditions, stress or disease. His study on vitamin A level in otters suggested that vitamin A deficiency may have been widespread in Britain's otter population with a possible role in its earlier decline.

Vic compiled what is probably the most comprehensive database of otter pathology, mortality and values for anatomy, physiology, organ weights in Europe.

The otter post-mortem (PM) protocol developed by Vic is unique in that it deviates from a general veterinary necropsy protocol. Indeed it is not just aimed at determining the cause of death but it is "designed" to record measures and data about anatomy and organs, to appropriately collect tissue samples and organs for histology and other analyses, and to monitor evidence for disease. Each step of the protocol is functional to give optimal results and maximize information. Vic believed that data about anatomy and organs are precious to pathologists, but are scarce or don't exist yet for most wild species, included otters. His PM protocol for otters was intended to fill this gap.

OSG members met Vic in 2000 when he attended the First Otter Toxicology Conference organized by the IOSF (International Otter Survival Fund) at the Skye Isle. During the conference Vic presented his post-mortem protocol for otters with the aim to ensuring a better comparability of the results obtained from different laboratories across Europe.

Ten years later (in 2010) Vic was keynote speaker at the workshop "*Post-Mortem tools for otters: monitoring and research*" at the National Environmental Research Institute (NERI) in Denmark. The international workshop was organized by the European section of the OSG, in particular by Anna Roos and Morten Elmeros, and was aimed at developing standardized PM procedures for the Eurasian otter and at promoting the exchange and sharing of information on otter samples.

The co-organizers of the workshop Bjarne Søgaard, Aksel Bo Madsen and Morten Elmeros, remember about Vic: "*Vic's cheerful enthusiasm and generosity was very inspiring and he obviously enjoyed sharing his knowledge on wildlife diseases and health issues*". People from nine European countries had the pleasure and honor of meeting Vic, learning his procedure, and practicing his PM protocol under his supervision. In my opinion, the workshop was a particularly valuable initiative of the OSG in Europe. Vic's PM protocol for otters became a "common heritage" of European otter people after the workshop. As a standard, it has been applied from a number of research groups across Europe since. I believe Vic has been truly happy with this.

Vic was a guest speaker at the XI International Otter Colloquium in Pavia (Italy), where he recommended making full use of road-killed otters. This is an important message of Vic to the otter people. Although road-mortality is the most common known cause of mortality in otters, typically we are not able to fully evaluate if it is an effective threat to the viability of otter populations. Probably it's not so in most of cases, but when we find a road-casualty otter we have an invaluable source of data and information in hands that we do have the duty to use at the best for otters conservation and well-being.

## **A Personal Tribute**

I met Vic and his fantastic wife, Jane, for the first time in 2010 at the “bloody workshop” in Denmark. A few years later, my partner Manlio and I had the true privilege of staying with them for some days during reciprocal visits in Italy and in Cornwall, at their lovely Jollys Bottom Farm and Wildlife VIC. I feel fortunate to have enjoyed their hospitality and friendship and hold many fond memories of time spent together: visiting a remote bloomed valley in Southern Italy; having a picnic along the Cornish coast or a drink on the bench in front of the pond at Jollys Bottom Farm; observing a crayfish in a river, honey buzzards in the sky or a salamander in the wood; cooking pizza together or tasting Jane’s excellent roast-beef “ritually” cut and served by Vic. Above all I greatly enjoyed talking with Vic about otters and everything.

Along with the vet pathologist prof. Leonardo Della Salda, I invited Vic to hold a one-day workshop on otter pathologies and PM protocol at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine of the University of Teramo in 2012, as a part of a post-mortem study of otters in Southern Italy we had just started. Lectures and workshops on wildlife pathologies are not so frequent in Veterinary Faculties in Italy. I am grateful to Vic for having accepted our invitation and was delighted that so many veterinary students have attended the workshop. My only regret is that I could not provide a enough “good corpse” for the demonstration of the otter PM protocol. Even today I’m so sorry Vic!

One year later, Vic had gifted me with the unexpected opportunity of being trained in otter post-mortems refining my necropsy technique at the Wildlife VIC. During the year between our reciprocal visits in Italy and Cornwall, Vic has kept five otters for my training. I probably couldn’t thank him enough for his generosity. Although not a vet, I’m proud to be among “students” of Vic. I could appreciate his rigorous methodology and vast knowledge of otters. My otter post-mortems required something like two-fold time than Vic, nevertheless my hesitation or slowness didn’t prevent him to continue smiling and encouraging me during the procedure. At the end of the training, Vic told me *“now you are among a few people in the world that are able to remove thyroid glands from an otter”*.

I learned a lot from Vic not only about otters and post-mortem procedures. He taught me that a post-mortem is not concluded at the necropsy table but when you complete the necropsy report (i.e. only after having revised measures and data recorded at the table and compared them with your database)...and also that to being methodical can help you to accomplish even difficult tasks; that there is the time to work hard and time to relax and that it’s important to care and enjoy the second one...or that you can learn something in each moment or situation. When Vic and Jane were in Italy, we visited a church in a village where a nun was speaking to churchgoers. At the exit Vic suggested me to use the nun as an example of the right way to speak during a talk. He believed I speak too quickly and, I know, he was right.

Vic was a great naturalist and an acute observer of both nature and human experience. I loved his curiosity. He was admirer of engineering works and he cherished his native language. As a non-native English speaker I was indebted to Vic for his perfect pronunciation and calm slow speech.

All those who have known Vic, for years or for a few minutes during a conference, or even just through emails, describe him with the same words: warm hearted, a gentle man, truly fine person, lovely, friendly, kind when ask an advice, always ready to share his knowledge and to pass on information, awfully generous. And indeed Vic was truly like that. I think Vic was also a forthright person and he had an analytical and critical approach to any aspect of life not only to scientific issues.

He had a fine sense of humor and I will never forget his playful and ironic giggle.

I can't close this tribute to Vic without paying homage to Jane. Jane is an extraordinary woman. Jane always supported Vic and his work. In Pavia Vic told me, jokingly, that Jane was his boss.

Vic will be missed by Jane, his grown up children, his family and friends, by us and...by otters and Britain's wildlife.

Ciao Vic!

Romina Fusillo