Obituary

Johannes Hallmann
Julius Kühn-Institut - Federal Research Centre for Cultivated Plants, Institute for Epidemiology and Pathogen Diagnostics), Toppheideweg 88, 48161 Münster, Germany
E-mail: johannes.hallmann@julius-kuehn.de
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Dieter Sturhan (1936–2017)

Dr Dieter Sturhan, nematologist at the Institute of Nematology and Vertebrate Research of the former Federal Biological Research Center for Agriculture and Forestry (BBA) passed away in Münster, Germany, on November 29, 2017.

Dieter Sturhan was born in 1936 in Meerbeck, Schaumburg-Lippe, Germany. He studied zoology, botany and geography at the Universities of Kiel, Erlangen and Munich. He received his doctorate in 1962 from Prof. Dr. med. H.J. Stammer from the Zoological Institute of the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg on a thesis entitled “On the systematics, biology and ecology of Longidorinae (Nematoda, Dorylaimoidea) with special reference to Longidorus maximus”. The practical part of his doctoral thesis was performed by Dieter Sturhan from 1958-1960 at the Bavarian State Institute for Plant Production and Plant Protection in Munich.

From his youth onwards, Dieter Sturhan was a passionate naturalist. As a teenager, he spent most of his free time bird watching. At the age of 19 years, he published his first scientific paper entitled “Observations of the ring ouzel (Turdus torquatus) in the autumn of 1954 in Meerbeck at Stadthagen” in Beiträge zur Naturkunde Niedersachsens (Contributions to the Natural History of Lower Saxony), Issue 8, pages 60-61. Ten more ornithological publications followed before he published his first nematological work, “Appearance of nematodes on strawberries in Bavaria” in 1960 in the journal Pflanzenschutz.

On October 1, 1962, Dieter Sturhan began working as a research assistant at the BBA in Münster. First employed on a DFG research project, he moved shortly afterwards to a permanent position and was appointed in 1973 as Senior Scientist and in 1978 as Scientific Director. His research focused on the taxonomy, ecology and distribution of nematodes. His major research interests included the race problems in Ditylenchus dipsaci as well as the taxonomic work on economically important nematode taxa, in particular cyst nematodes (Heterodera) and root-knot nematodes (Meloidogyne). Dieter Sturhan also worked on nematodes as bioindicators for water quality, the distribution of entomopathogenic nematodes (Steinernema, Heterorhabditis) in Germany, and on the importance of nematophagous fungi and bacteria as antagonists of plant-parasitic nematodes.

His taxonomic studies took him to the Canaries, Madeira, Azores, Iran, Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Vietnam, Egypt and New Zealand. However, his biggest travel activity was concentrated on Germany. His goal was to document the distribution of plant-parasitic nematodes in Germany. The plan was to study at least three soil samples per 10 km² quadrant, one each from arable fields, grassland and forest. Many family vacations were subordinated to this higher goal. The resulting data formed the basis of the German nematode collection, which was founded by Dieter Sturhan and today includes more than 5,000 permanent slides (including 800 types) of about 1,000 species from about 250 genera of about 4,000 sampling sites.

Starting in 1980 Dieter Sturhan accepted a teaching assignment at the University of Münster on “Applied zoology with special consideration of animal pests on cultivated plants”, which involved the supervision of diploma and doctoral students. Dieter Sturhan developed identification keys for all plant-parasitic nematodes occurring in Germany and every year he conducted workshops on nematode identification for the employees of the plant protection service. He acted as ‘final reference’ for nematode identification in any request by colleagues of the official plant protection
services. Dieter Sturhan was a member of several national and international societies and from 1980 to 1987 he coordinated the working group Nematology of the German Scientific Society for Plant Protection and Plant Health.

Dieter Sturhan published his research results in 299 scientific papers, of which 79 papers were produced after his retirement. His last papers appeared in 2016, “On the presence or absence of phasmids in males of Heteroderidae (Tylenchida)” in *Nematology* and a comprehensive review on “Nematodes of the order Tylenchida in Germany – the non-phytoparasitic species” in *Soil Organisms*, co-authored by Karin Hohberg from the Senckenberg Museum of Natural History in Görlitz.

In total, Dieter Sturhan proposed 1 family, 1 subfamily, 12 genera and 76 species of plant-parasitic nematodes, including 11 species in the economically important genus *Heterodera*, six species in the genus *Xiphinema* and four species in the genus *Longidorus*. He also described a nematophagous fungus (*Hirsutella heteroderae = H. rhossiliensis*) and performed 44 synonymisations or assignments of individual species to other genera. A total of six nematode species were named after him (*Hemicycliophora sturhani*, *Longidorus sturhani*, *Oriverutus sturhani*, *Ogma sturhani*, *Axonchium sturhani* and *Oxydirus sturhani*). In 2001, Dr Dieter Sturhan was honoured as Fellow of the Society of Nematologists.

Until his last days, Dieter Sturhan worked on taxonomic issues in close contact with the taxonomic experts from around the world. The latter will continue his work, being aware that with the loss of Dieter Sturhan an almost inexhaustible source of taxonomic expertise in the field of nematology is no longer available.

Dieter Sturhan was an internationally renowned nematologist but, above all, a committed fellow citizen, great colleague and a wonderful family person. We will always have good memories of Dieter Sturhan. His relatives have our compassion.


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