

THE 17TH WORLD CONGRESS OF MALACOLOGY

CONFERENCE REPORT

The 17th World Congress of Malacology was held from the 18th to the 24th of July 2010, in Phuket Town (Island of Phuket, Thailand). It was the first time the Congress was held in Asia, and not long before the Congress we were not sure if we would ever get there, because of the political unrest in Thailand in the spring of 2010. However, our Thai colleagues kept promising that everything would be all right, and in the end everything was more than all right.

The Congress venue was the Royal Phuket City Hotel, big enough to accommodate all of us; it had lots of conference rooms as well, where all the sessions were held. In the hotel lobby, just before you entered the conference rooms, there were two Congress mascots (Figs 1, 2): two Thai endemics, very beautifully made, complete with identification labels, and very big: when you stood next to one of them, assuming you were medium height, the tentacles reached to your shoulder.

The Congress fee was very reasonable, considering that it included not only the two receptions, plus very reception-like poster session, but also lunches during the sessions. Every participant was given a Congress bag, tickets for all the receptions, lunch tickets and – of course – abstract volume which, by the way, was very heavy and contributed to the weight of our luggage when we were going home.

The day before the Congress sessions started (July 18th, Sunday) there was the icebreaker reception, at the Kata Beach Resort & Spa, a very nice and posh hotel on the seaside. Mind you, malacologists are a sociable lot, they hardly need to break ice, but they like receptions a lot, and this one was lots of nice booze and nice snacks. We hardly had time to recover and then, on Tuesday (20th) we had the poster session which was a reception rather than poster display: booze and lots of very special little snacks, so that very many people went foraging among the food and drink stalls instead of staying at their posters. Wednesday (21st) was (quite sensibly) a day off: people could either go to the Congress excursion, or do whatever

they liked. The sessions continued on the 22nd and 23rd. The farewell dinner on the evening of the 23rd was held at the same hotel as the icebreaker (Fig. 3). The food was great, the drinks too, there was a folk group performing (Fig. 4), and the authors of the best student posters and presentations were given prizes.

The official conference trip went to the Marine Biological Center, the Phuket Aquarium, and the Sea Shell Museum. The Marine Biological Center carries out numerous research and educational tasks. One of them is the breeding of rare and vulnerable species for aquaria and reintroductions. We were shown the large-scale nurseries of various species of turtles and fish (Figs 5–8), including sea-horses and sharks.

Among the Phuket Aquarium creatures, the most impressive were the giant groupers (*Epinephelus lanceolatus*), the largest reef-dwelling fish in the world. Giant they are, reaching almost 3 m and weighing up to 600 kg. The species is listed in the IUCN Red List as vulnerable because of exploitation. Groupers that are served in restaurants typically range in weight from 20 kg to 50 kg. Just before the Congress, a grouper over 2 m long and weighing 220 kg had been caught and sold to a restaurant in Singapore. This was featured on the first pages of the newspapers. The Straits Times we were handed out on a plane to Phuket called it “a monster fish” and detailed the various prized parts of the fish, including a 3 kg eyeball, throat and lips, ordered in advance by wealthy customers. How can a species be saved whose consumption is so glamorized by popular press?

The Sea Shell Museum amazed us. The exhibition features more than 2,000 species, including the only left-handed noble volute (*Cymbiola nobilis*) ever found, a 250 kg shell of a giant clam (*Tridacna gigas*), 380 million-year-old fossils, and one of the world’s rarest golden pearls. Our personal favourites were however the xenophorids, marine snails whose name loosely translated from Greek means “carrying foreigners”. As the shell grows, the animal cements

small stones, shells or pieces of coral to its edge, creating the most extraordinary, absolutely unique sea-shell collections.

The organising committee was quite big and included the President of Unitas Prof. Dr. SOMSAK PANHA (Chairman), Dr. PIYOROS TONGKERD (Secretary General), Dr. CHIRASAK SUTCHARIT (Academic Chair) and five members; the staff (registration, in-

formation etc.) included 12 people, girls and boys, some looking so young that they must have been students. Thanks, everybody! Everything was perfect!

The list of participants in the Book of Abstracts included 320 people; we suspect a few of them failed to appear, though we know of only two such people (and they were Greek), but below we list the countries and the numbers of participants as they appeared in the



Figs 1–3: 1, 2. Mascots of the Congress. Photo B. M. POKRYSZKO; 3. Farewell dinner at the Kata Beach Resort & Spa. Photos: R. A. D. CAMERON



Figs 4–8: 4. Folk dance during the farewell dinner; 5. A fish who liked to be photographed, Phuket Aquarium; 6. Sea Shell Museum – a fragment of the exhibition; 7. Baby sea turtles, Marine Biological Center; 8. Baby *Tridacna*, Marine Biological Center. Photos: 4 – B. M. POKRYSZKO, 5–8 – M. OZGO

Book: Argentina (1), Australia (19), Austria (6), Belgium (10), Brazil (7), Brunei Darussalam (1), Canada (2), Chile (3), China (7), Czech Republic (5), Denmark (2), Egypt (1), Fiji (2), Finland (1), France (5), Germany (34), Greece (2), Guam (2), Hungary (2), India (5), Ireland (2), Israel (1), Japan (20), Kenya (1), Korea (2), Malaysia (9), Nepal (1), Netherlands (7), New Zealand (5), Nigeria (2), Norway (5), Philippines (3), Poland (6), Portugal (6), Russia (10), Singapore (1), South Africa (6), Spain (15), Taiwan (2), Thailand (24), Turkey (3), UK (18), USA (52). When you arrange the countries (44 of them!) according to the decreasing number of participants, Poland shares the not very bad and not very good 14th place with Austria, Portugal and South Africa.

There were many special symposia, many of them (6) marine, freshwater or both: Studies on Opisthobranch Molluscs; The Biology and Evolution of Limpets; Ecology, Evolution and Biology of Freshwater Bivalves; Evolution of the Bivalvia; Countdown 2010: Towards a Global Freshwater Assessment of Threatened Species; Mollusc Aquaculture. The partly or wholly terrestrial symposia (5) were: Reproduction and Mating Systems in Hermaphroditic Molluscs; The Systematics of Asian Land Snails; Evolutionary Ecology and Genetics of Molluscan Populations; Speciation: Insights from Insular Isolation to Global Patterns; Community Ecology of Tropical Forest Land Snails. The two general symposia were Emerging Molluscan Models: Biological Questions in the 21st Century, and The Last 50 Years of Malacology: Specialization, Methodological Transformation and Globalization. There were also many open Sessions.

To analyse the topical structure we tried to categorise the presentations and immediately encountered difficulties. For example, ecology may be classical, very general or genetic (and does it then classify as genetics?); phylogenetic papers may be molecular, morphology-based or based on all possible characters; phylogeography is both phylogeny and biogeography; systematics ranges from identification of two sibling species to big revisions, fossil papers may have a structural component to them, etc. To make things worse, many papers had deceptive titles, suggesting for example only systematics while they also had a pronounced biogeographical component. The categories adopted in the graph in Fig. 9 are the following: Phylogeny includes phylogeny, systematics and evolution, no matter on what character sets they are based. Genetics is population, experimental and molecular genetics. Ecology includes community ecology, genetic ecology and detailed analyses of autecology of single species. Biogeography comprises biogeography *sensu stricto*, while phylogeographic papers are classified both under "biogeography" and "phylogeny". Life histories include presentations on all or some aspects of life histories, except embryonic and/or larval development which is categorised under Develop-

ment. Structure means details of macro- and microstructure of organisms or their organs, including anatomy and histology. Physiology groups papers on the function of organisms or their organs, as well as effect of some factors on the organism's function. Conservation and Behaviour are self-explanatory, and so are Fossil and Methods. History and Collections includes papers on the history of malacology, on individual collections and also "state of the art" presentations. Faunistics includes reports on faunal composition of various areas as well as discoveries of new localities of individual taxa. Applied papers are about aquaculture, heliculture and pest control. Parasitology deals with molluscs as hosts, while Variation includes presentations on all aspects of inter- and intrapopulation variation. Whenever there was doubt, the paper was classified in two categories.

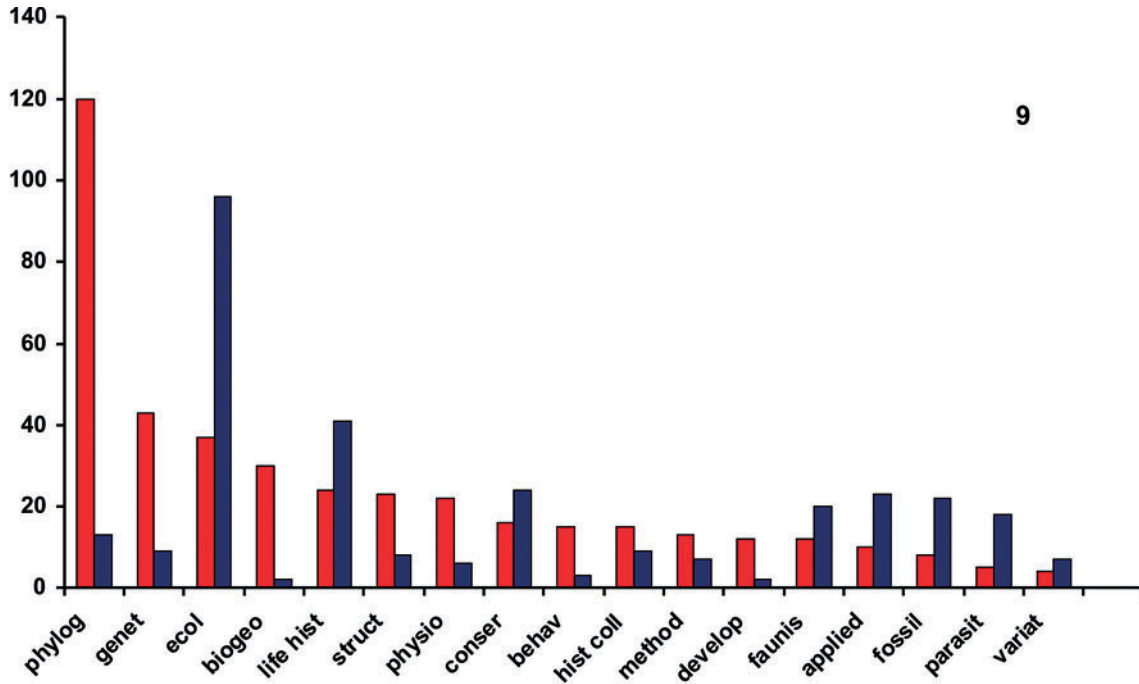
The graph in Fig. 9 presents the topical structure of the Congress presentations (first bars) and such structure of the Polish Malacological Seminars in 2006–2010. The real differences concern on the one hand phylogeny-systematics-evolution, genetics, biogeography, structure, physiology, behaviour and development, all of which are much less represented during our local seminars, on the other hand ecology, life histories, conservation, faunistics, applied malacology, fossil malacology and parasitology which are much better represented at our seminars. Mostly the differences seem to result from the fact that we have just so many malacologists, so some disciplines are represented only occasionally and during some seminars not at all. For example, very many phylogenetic-systematic-evolutionary presentations dealt with marine taxa, and how many marine malacologists do we have in Poland? Secondly, our seminars, held every year, are more of a workshop character, with many people presenting results of local significance (especially ecology, faunistics and conservation). Thirdly, we often present finished fragments of unfinished projects which we later incorporate in a bigger paper which is classified differently. Finally, and this is optimistic, we seem to have very active life history, fossil and applied lobbies.

The six Polish malacologists who attended the Congress: ANDRZEJ FALNIOWSKI, MAGDA SZAROWSKA, TOMEK KAŁUSKI, MARIANNA SOROKA (plus non-malacological husband), MAŁGORZATA OŹGO and the first author of this report, represented the boundary of phylogeny and genetics, genetics, boundary of genetics and evolution, applied malacology and ecological biogeography; our presentations dealt with both gastropods and bivalves, and the action was set in both land and water.

The ratio of oral presentations to posters during the Congress was 1.49:1 (1.5:1 during the 2010 Seminar). The snail:bivalve ratio was 2.39:1, discounting 21 presentations on other molluscan classes (2.33:1 during the 2010 Seminar), the land:water ratio was 0.38:1 (1.5:1 at the 2010 Seminar). This latter discrepancy is

easily explained by the negligible number of people in Poland dealing with marine taxa. The ratio of one-author presentations to presentations with two or more authors was 0.28:1 at the Congress, and 0.85:1 at the 2010 Seminar which may result from the fact that we encourage students to present work in progress.

It is very difficult to give a brief account of the most important scientific news from the Congress. Methods: molluscs are becoming increasingly popular as models for the studies of evolution of such aspects of life as torsion, metamorphosis, biomineralisation, innate immunity, memory and



Figs 9–11: 9. Graph showing the relative popularity of various disciplines of malacology during the 2010 Congress and at the Polish Malacological Seminars 2006–2010; 10, 11. Rainforest at the Sirinath National Park. Photos: B. M. POKRYSZKO

learning behaviour. Both molluscan population ecology and molluscan systematics are getting increasingly molecularised, with quite promising results. The number of systematic-phylogenetic-evolutionary presentations at the Congress proves that this aspect of malacology is "trendy" again rather than "passé" which it was for quite a long time. Previously neglected problems: the previously neglected areas, most of all Asia, are now the focus of interest of many specialists in phylogeny, ecology, biogeography and conservation. Darwin's year: 2009 had been Darwin's year: the 200th anniversary of his birthday and the 150th anniversary of the publication of "Origin of Species". Hence the Evolution Megalab, launched in 2009 and aiming at enabling large number of people to contribute observations of *Cepaea* polymorphism. During the Congress we were given a preliminary analysis of the results which, even though not every country within the distribution range of *Cepaea* contributed equally, seemed to be quite impressive.

During the farewell dinner prizes were given for the best student posters and presentations. In fact all the presentations of the young malacologists were good, and we think everybody deserved a prize. The presentations we liked, either by students or by quite mature malacologists, were: Streptaxidae in Asia: prospects and predictions by BEN ROWSON (a brand new doctor then), Phylogenetic reconstruction and shell evolution of the subfamily Diplommatinae by NICOLE WEBSTER (plus co-authors), The land snail genus *Rhiostoma* by SOMSAK PANHA (plus many co-authors), An assessment of the genetic diversity of *Prestonella*, an endemic genus from the Great Escarpment of South Africa by JANINE L. FEARON (plus co-authors), Another invited invader – phylogeography of *Carychium minimum* in Europe, North America and on the Azores by ALEXANDER M. WEIGAND (plus co-authors), The geography of partulid tree snail diversification: new insights from old specimens by DIARMAID O FOIGHIL (plus co-author), The difficulty of delimiting species of the largely selfing land snail genus *Rumina* by VANYA PREVOT (plus co-authors), Parapatry in Pilbara *Rhagada* – something old or something new? by ZOE R. HAMILTON (plus co-author), The *Rhagada* land snails of Rosemary Island: a taxonomist's nightmare and evolutionist's delight by SEAN STANKOWSKI, Phylogeography of the high Alpine Austrian endemic: *Cylindrus obtusus* by LUISE KRUCKENHAUSER (with many co-authors). These are only examples, in fact very many papers and posters were really, really good.

Phuket is often called the "Pearl of Andaman" and is one of the most beautiful islands in the Andaman region, just next door to two national parks: Sirinath and Phang Nga Bay National Park, and not far from the well known Krabi (Hat Noppharat Thara National Park) and Phi Phi Island. This was one of the reasons why most participants arrived well before and left well after the Congress. An-

other was that, for most of us, it would not have made much sense to go so far only for a week, especially a week spent in the conference rooms. We do not know what everybody did, but we did a lot and really had fun. Before the Congress we managed to go to the beach and have a few good swims. Sun was another matter – it being the monsoon season, we had to escape from the beach and have a walk in the rain quite often. During one such rainy walk we saw great numbers of ever-present active *Achatina*. On another day we visited a real rainforest in Khao Phra National Park, and took many photos of snails and insects, and beautiful bright red amphibious crabs (Figs 10–17). On the excursion day (Wednesday) some people went to the Congress excursion and enjoyed it (see above), while other people went to various destinations. We (about ten people, a mixed British–Czech–German–Polish party, including the first and third author) went to the beach, then to look for snails, and then to visit the monkeys on what we called the TV Hill (Figs 18, 19), with a good meal and beer in a sideroad restaurant on the way, and we had a great day. Another party, our good friends, went for an elephant ride and rafting along the stream and were even more delighted. After the Congress we went to a day snorkelling trip to the Phi Phi Islands, and though the ferry trip and then the speed boat trip were thoroughly enjoyable, the coral reefs were a little bit of a disappointment: many bits of them dying or already dead. Nevertheless we managed to see a live *Tridacna* and a live *Trochus*, and some live corals, and the bird nests which are regarded as delicacy in Thailand – the bird is some kind of swift and you make soup of its nests. On the next day we went to Phang Nga, to see the limestone hills and snails, and then we booked a mangrove trip from there to mangrove swamps. We really enjoyed the mangrove trip, even though it rained on us a lot on the way back: we saw all those weird islands with very bizarre erosion forms (Fig. 20), some hollow inside so that you could go inside the island in your boat and see bits of mangroves growing in there; we saw mangrove snails and mud skippers (they are fish, not snails) and beautiful villages on water (Fig. 21) – built just next to completely inaccessible islands, on a sort of ratfs or jetties.

You all know very well that every three years we elect a new president of the Unitas. Grumpy old people say that this is because the old president, having organised one congress, is not of any use any more... However, this time we elected ANTONIO DE FRIAS MARTINS from the Azores (Fig. 22), congratulations Tony! Some of you may remember the 5th Congress of the European Malacological Societies held in Ponta Delgada, The Azores, in September 2008. Tony was its main organiser and he proved he was a very good organiser indeed. This was probably why we voted for him, poor man.



Figs 12–17. Some of the creatures we saw: 12. Hermit crab; 13. Cicada; 14. *Cryptozona* snail; 15. What we called “kebab caterpillar”; 16. *Cyclophorus* snail; 17. Amphibious crab. Photos: 12–16 – R. A. D. CAMERON, 17 – B. M. POKRYSZKO



Figs 18–20: 18, 19. Monkeys on the way to the "TV Hill". 20. An island just about to fall over. Photos: B. M. POKRYSZKO



Figs 21–22: 21. Village on water; 22. Poster session. The newly elected President of the Unitas being charming to girls. Photos: B. M. POKRYSZKO

The Phuket Congress was my [the first author's] tenth (the previous ones were: 1983 Budapest, 1986 Edinburgh, 1989 Tübingen, 1992 Siena, 1995 Vigo, 1998 Washington, 2001 Vienna, 2004 Perth, 2007 Antwerp), and I feel sort of justified in making some comments on the transformations that took place during that time. In Budapest the text of my presentation (which I then learned by heart) was carefully typed, with a carbon copy. I showed perhaps three slides, black & white, with the old-fashioned slide projector and I had to say "next slide please" each time I wanted to show another. In Edinburgh the slides were also of the old-fashioned kind, but then blue & white was the rage, and the same in Tübingen, I remember using transparencies in Washington and preparing the poster for Perth "manually" i.e. using scissors and glue. Of course, some more civilised countries started using PowerPoint a bit earlier, but generally the last ten congresses have witnessed a great technical progress, both regarding presentation techniques and, maybe especially, molecular techniques. In Budapest there were no parallel sessions, and not so many people, maybe about a hundred, then the numbers started increasing but fluctuating, depending on the location. For example, there were very many people in Washington, because the Congress was combined with the AMU meeting, or in Vienna, because of the location. Formerly, people's names told you roughly where they worked. Now a very good example is

MANUEL MALAQUIAS – a representative of... Norway. More and more people work abroad. I do not remember a conservation paper from Budapest, or even Edinburgh; now there are many. The number of studies in exotic terrae incognitae has increased (or they are better advertised): central Africa, India, Pakistan, Thailand. Some of the old malacologists have passed away, some middle-aged ones have retired, and the young ones have become middle-aged while a whole new generation has appeared. But, frankly, I can not say that very much has changed: there are still hordes of enthusiastic people trying to do their research as best they can!

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