

In Memoriam: Dr. Ronald O'Dor

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In Memoriam: Dr. Ronald O'Dor

[Dr. Ron O'Dor](#), a visionary scientist, colleague, and great friend to the Dalhousie University Department of Biology and the Faculty of Science, as well as to the international scientific community, passed away on 11 May due to COVID-19 related complications.

Ron was born in Kansas City, Missouri, and his career spanned the fields of biochemistry, physiology and marine biology, with specialties in cephalopod biology and aquatic animal telemetry. He completed his undergraduate degree in biochemistry at the University of California Berkeley and his PhD in physiology at the University of British Columbia. After a postdoctoral fellowship at Cambridge University in the UK, Ron took up a faculty position in Biology at Dalhousie University in 1973. He was Director of Dalhousie's Aquatron Laboratory from 1986-1993, Chair of the Biology Department from 1997-2000, and held short-term positions of Visiting Researcher/Scientist at various universities in Canada, the USA, Australia, China, France, Japan, Papua New Guinea, Portugal, and South Africa, until he became Emeritus Professor at Dalhousie upon his retirement in 2015.

Perhaps Ron is best known for his immense contributions to cephalopod ecology and physiology, achieved by using a suite of interdisciplinary techniques including behaviour and ecology, physiology and innovative telemetry tracking techniques. He was an ecophysiologicalist long before the term became popular. His lab was always filled with repurposed scientific equipment tied together with wire and plumbing bits. In fact, for a time there was a "MacGyver Award" (named after the TV show hero who was always cobbling things together to save the day) in the Biology Department, but it went out of fashion after a while because Ron was in almost permanent possession of the award. One of the favourite contraptions was a squid "swim tunnel" he put together on a field trip to the Azores made out of building supplies and a fish trolling motor. He harnessed this to observe at what current speeds squid switched between fins and jet propulsion. He famously published papers such as the "Choreography of the squid's nuptial dance" and "The incredible flying squid." One of Ron's quests was to know why squid fly – that is, squid not only swim, they occasionally fly, propelling themselves like rockets forward up and out of the water. His response to a journalist when he was asked why they fly was typical Ron: Who wouldn't want to be a rocket? Why be an astronaut when you can be a rocket?

When the Census of Marine Life (CoML) - a 10-year international effort undertaken to assess the diversity, distribution, and abundance of marine life – formally launched in 2000, the breadth and depth of Ron's interests and sense of humor made him the obvious candidate for Chief Scientist. He moved to Washington DC to take on this role from 2000-2010. Ron took a big gamble on the CoML and did an unsurpassable job in recruiting, stimulating, connecting, and communicating, in Nova Scotia, across Canada, and around the entire planet. Out of the CoML grew a dream of Ron's: the idea to build a global network of acoustic receivers and oceanographic sensors in all the ocean regions of the world to track keystone tagged animals along migratory routes. And hence was born the Ocean Tracking Network (OTN), headquartered at Dalhousie University and launched as a Canada

Foundation for Innovation International Joint Venture Project in 2008. Fast forward to today and the work of many dedicated personnel who made it happen: OTN is now a global research, conservation and infrastructure platform and one of Canada's National Research Facilities, focused on understanding aquatic animal movements and survival in relation to changing environments in order to enable better stewardship of the world's aquatic resources. OTN also has been foundational to the birth and growth of other major oceans initiatives and research at Dalhousie. For his work with the CoML and the OTN Ron was named Canada's Environmental Scientist of the Year by *Canadian Geographic* in 2009.

Ron was also a valuable mentor to students, postdoctoral fellows and other trainees. He was known for encouraging students to visualize the puzzle as a whole before trying to put the pieces together, and to learn the importance of resourcefulness - the ability to take the tools you have at your disposal and adapt them to solve a problem at hand. One past student described how the defining moment of their research career came when, after much pondering and discussion of how they could study the relative roles of hydrodynamic drag and gravitational forces in the feeding and swimming dynamics of larval scallops, Ron saw a Request For Proposal from the Canadian Space Agency for work on the NASA space shuttle. Voila: a simple solution – blast the larvae into space to eliminate gravity and see what they did. It was another Ron moment where a tool was adapted by a resourceful mind for an unconventional purpose. But they did it: “Scallops in Space.” Students fondly remember that Ron was kind, gentle, smiled ALL the time, could speak on an incredible breadth of topics, and *always* wore a suit jacket with his signature turtleneck.

And finally, with students and colleagues alike, Ron was a social animal, working the fifth-floor lounge or rooms at conferences, bouncing ideas and jokes around with a smile and clap on the shoulder. The weekly Biology Departmental seminars and associated BioBeer were essential events for him and an opportunity to discuss ideas and foster the social cohesion of the Department.

Ron will be sorely missed but always remembered. He will be remembered for his big ideas on big science, the use of cutting-edge technologies, for his ready smile and laugh, for his inventiveness worthy of MacGyver, and for his kindness and humanity. Ron leaves behind his loving companion Janet, who tolerated his idiosyncrasies and brought out the best in him for 52 years. He also leaves two children, and four grandchildren. For those of us in the science community who knew him as a colleague, teacher and friend, the world is a bit dimmer, and science less fun, than it was just yesterday.

Ron's official obituary will be posted in the coming days. The Ron O'Dor Memorial Fund has been set-up in his legacy: giving.dal.ca/ronodor