

IN MEMORIAM

DR. MICHAEL ROBINSON
(1929-2008)

UDC 929 Robinson M. : 59

Michael H. Robinson, 79, a ruddy-faced Englishman who led the transformation of the National Zoo from a collection of pens and cages to a park where animals lived in something akin to their natural environments, died on March 22 of pancreatic cancer at his home in Alexandria.

During his 16-year tenure as director of the Smithsonian National Zoological Park, Dr. Robinson installed the controversial Think Tank, an exhibit on animal thinking that investigated orangutan language exploration and tool use. He helped open the Amazonia building, at the time the largest exhibit to be added to the zoo in 50 years, and was responsible for opening the Invertebrate House, with its spider exhibit without glass. (He was a spider specialist.) He also directed the development of the Pollinarium, where visitors study plants and the animals that pollinate them.

Dr. Robinson maintained that a zoo should be a "biopark," a place where the public could not only view animals, but also learn about their place in the environment and the interdependence of living things. He occasionally drew criticism from traditionalists who insisted that the primary task of a zoo is to provide a clear view of a majestic lion or tiger, a lovable otter cavorting in a clear pond.

He enjoyed being around animals as well, sharing his home at various times with giant crab spiders, a crab-eating raccoon, a kinkajou, several coatimundis, an otter, an ocelot, a jaguarundi, and a giant rat. For zoos he adhered to the dual mission Congress articulated when it authorized the National Zoo, which opened in 1889 for the advancement of



science and recreation of the people.

"I believe passionately that zoos are probably the most important force in informal education that we can muster," he told *The Washington Post* in 1990.

Michael H. Robinson was born in Preston, Lancashire, England, where his father ran a pet store and brought home birds, reptiles and tropical fish for his son's enjoyment. At about 12 years of age, he got interested in tropical fish and started a home aquarium.

"When I started getting interested in breeding tropical fish and seeing them lay eggs and raise their young, my whole attitude to animals changed, and I became very interested in natural history and from that in biology," he told *The Post* in 1984.

He had wanted to be a biologist from a young age, but when his father died in 1942, he was apprenticed as a bricklayer. He was conscripted into the Royal Air Force in 1950, serving in the medical corps, and then was admitted to teacher's college, where he majored in history and biology. He taught science at a secondary school in Oswaldtwistle and at a girls' grammar school in Cornwall.

He received an undergraduate degree from the University of Wales in 1963 and a doctorate in zoology in 1966 from Oxford, where he studied under the tutelage of Nikolaas Tinbergen, a Dutch animal behaviorist and Nobel Prize-winner.

He realized that he was much more interested in studying animals in their natural habitat than in running laboratory rats through contrived experiments.

He once told *The Post* that he had remained a little boy his whole life in his desire to be with animals, live with them, see them.

He had counterparts who used computers to simulate animal behavior, but that wasn't his approach. "It's probably a much more sophisticated kind of biology, but it's not my kind," he said.

Before becoming director of the National Zoo in 1984, Dr. Robinson spent 18 years in Panama studying animal behavior at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute. He specialized in the study of predator-prey adaptations in insects, particularly spiders. Panama, he told *The New York Times* in 1984, was for an animal behaviorist the equivalent of "access to Fort Knox."

As director of the 163-acre zoological park on Connecticut Avenue, home to more than 2,000 animals of 400 different species, Dr. Robinson was eager to share his enthusiasm and respect for animals. Instantly recognizable by his British accent and shock of irrepressible white hair, he was a familiar figure on TV and made colorful presentations before the House Appropriations Committee when it was chaired by then-Rep. Sidney R. Yates (D-Ill). He occasionally visited lawmakers with zoo animals in tow, once escorting a rare Komodo dragon as he embarked on a Capitol Hill appropriations hunt.

"Mike was wonderful at persuading Congress, and some of us on the Mall were jealous," Donald Ortner, a National Museum of Natural History cura-

tor, told *The Post* in 1999. "We didn't have the cute little monkeys and such."

When he retired in 2001, Dr. Robinson went back to Panama and spent six months studying reef squid and orb-weaving spiders. He moved to Stuart, Fla., in 2001, where he continued to observe the behavior of spiders, birds, raccoons, and a fox in his back yard and the surrounding countryside. He moved back to the Washington area last year.

He was the author of numerous scholarly articles and several books, including "Ecology and Behavior of the Giant Wood Spider *Nephila maculata* (Fabricius) in New Guinea" (1973), with Barbara Robinson, and "Zoo Animals: A Smithsonian Guide" (1995), with David Challinor and Holly Webber. While his illness was in remission, he completed "The Road to Wau," a memoir not yet published about the village in Papua New Guinea where he and his wife lived and worked for three years.

His marriage to Barbara Robinson, a colleague for many years, ended in divorce. There are no immediate survivors.

In a 1984 *Post* interview, Dr. Robinson responded to a question about his epitaph: "Oh my God, I don't want a tombstone. I want cremating and sprinkling over Barro Colorado Island in Panama to be regenerated into the tropical life cycle."

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