

### A TRIBUTE MILEN VASSILEV (1958-2013)

On 30 May 2013, a colleague and friend, Dr. Milen Vassilev, Associate Professor at the Institute of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Research of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, passed away.

Milen was born in Silistra on 18 June 1958. He graduated in Biology in 1980 at the Sofia University and obtained his PhD in 1986 at the A. N. Severtsov Institute of Ecology and Evolution of the Russian Academy of Sciences. He was appointed to the position of Research Scientist in 1986 and in 2008 to the position of Associate Professor and Leader of the “Fish Biodiversity and Resources” research group at his institute at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.



Prof. Milen Vassilev

Milen was a tremendously versatile fish biologist who covered a great variety of topics while researching fishes. His field of work extended from classical taxonomy (Vassilev, 1998; Polačik et al., 2011), via phylogeography and molecular systematics (Sediva et al., 2008; Chelenkova et al., 2011), faunistics (Vassilev & Pehlivanov, 2002, 2005; Vassilev & Trichkova, 2007; Vassilev et al., 2008; Polačik et al., 2008a, b; Apostolou et al., 2011), ecology (Pehlivanov & Vassilev, 2003; Polačik et al., 2008b,c) and conservation biology concerned with threatened fish species and habitats (Vassilev, 2003, 2005; Velkov et al., 2004; Pehlivanov & Vassilev, 2005; Vassilev, 2006; Trichkova et al., 2006; Lenhardt et al., 2012), to applied approaches in fisheries science (Vassilev & Pehlivanov, 2003; Vassilev et al., 2011; Zarev et al., 2013) and the biology of alien and invasive fish (Stefanov & Vas-

silev, 2006; Jurajda et al., 2006; Polačik et al., 2009; Simonović et al., 2013). Milen had a special interest in the effects of human-related activities on the composition of fish communities in Bulgarian inland and coastal waters (Vassilev, 1999; Beron et al., 2000) and the conservation of their original fish diversity (Pehlivanov et al., 2009). His broad field of interest and abundant records, along with his fruitful collaboration with his colleagues, resulted in two masterpieces (Economidis et al., 2009; Vassilev et al., 2012), each revealing his capacity to summarize the knowledge gathered and present it in the most appropriate and accessible way.

Dr. Milen Vassilev's early work was devoted to fish migrations, both those in the range of fresh waters and diadromous migrations (Vassilev, 1994a,b,c), researching the phenomena that would provide a better understanding of the reasons and determinants that power this strategy of life history. However, he soon realized that natural migrations are strongly influenced by human impacts. Of these, the creation of reservoirs was the most prominent one he considered to be adverse to the downstream dispersal of fish offspring. Moreover, he was among the first to understand the need to assess the contemporary level of knowledge about the fish fauna of Bulgaria and to initiate further investigations. He took into account the new and dynamic processes and events that occurred at the shift between centuries which strongly influenced inland water ecosystems and their fish fauna (Vassilev, 1998, 1999a, b). Milen suc-

ceeded in relating basic fish biology to applied issues. He assessed and explained human-related processes, both those that occurred from within the country, e.g., the effects on migratory sturgeon species (Vassilev, 1986; Pavlov et al., 1988), as well as external processes which impacted the native aquatic ecosystems of inland and coastal waters in Bulgaria, such as the occurrence of paddlefish juveniles in the River Danube (Vassilev & Pehlivanov, 2005) that exhibited a remarkable degree of endemism. He realized that establishing the starting point of the status of native recipient ecosystems at the right time and surveying the introduction of alien species could assist in estimating their effects in acclimatization and naturalization, as well as in solving the problems that started to appear.

Milen's special contribution to Bulgarian, Balkan and European fish biology lay in his comprehensive investigations of migratory sturgeon species in the Bulgarian/Romanian section of the River Danube, as well as of Ponto-Caspian gobies in streams and rivers in the drainage and coastal areas of the Black and Aegean Seas' basins. His results greatly contributed to the conservational efforts devoted to migratory sturgeon species, especially beluga, in the lower River Danube stretch (Vassilev, 2003, 2005, 2006), as well as to an understanding of the effects of Ponto-Caspian gobies in their contemporary dispersal upstream of the River Danube (Vassilev et al., 2008; Polačik et al., 2008a, 2009).

Collaboration and communication with Milen were always a pleasure. He was always interested in hearing something new, exchanging records and supplementing his data with those of others, check-

ing his results and validating them with those of other colleagues, taking part in mutual work in the broader area. He unselfishly gave full access to his records and actively participated in data processing and the interpretation of results. He took a leading position in the organization of the COMBAFF Symposium held in Ohrid in late spring of 2009, sharing all of our positive expectations in future collaboration opportunities between fish biologists of the Balkan area. In addition to his scientific contribution in organizing this meeting, he made an unforgettable contribution to its social dimension, always facilitating an open and fluent communication in both work and entertainment activities that were held there. This ease in communication and our excellent mutual understanding encouraged me to consider with him many opportunities for collaboration, the first being successfully realized in a paper covering the issue of invasive fish species in the inland waters of the Balkan area.

I am sure that his fellow colleagues and collaborators will retain a vivid memory of Milen's personality. He was one of the most prominent and broadly accepted participants of the community of fish scientists in the region. I am proud and honored to have known him. I am deeply saddened that we cannot share our ideas, friendship and joyful expectations with him anymore. He left us with a legacy of awareness of the necessity to bring together our knowledge and efforts in future collaboration. To commemorate our appreciation, we should preserve his legacy.

Prof. P. Simonović  
Prof. A. APOSTOLOU