

The Second World Congress of Herpetology

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It ran from 29 December 1993 to 6 January 1994 and was the largest herp gathering ever seen in the Southern Hemisphere. Delegates from over 80 countries converged on Adelaide for the second world herp congress. The first was held at the UK's Canterbury University in September 1989.

Australia's most famous frog-man (and author of numerous books and papers), Associate Professor Michael J. Tyler, had the official title of "Congress Director." He was the linchpin of the whole event. Tyler, who is based at Adelaide University, beat the competing bids from Costa Rica and Singapore for the right to host this Second World Congress of Herpetology. For the last 3-4 years Tyler and his team of close associates at Adelaide Uni have been snowed under organizing the event.

Tyler timed the event to coincide with the University's summer vacation and so was able to utilize many of the University's lecture halls, bars and other venues for the congress. Many other university services, such as the media and some administration offices, became offices for the congress and so the event could be held in a first class environment, friendly to both the organizers and the visitors.

Tyler enlisted and got the services of the top Herpetological talent from Australia and all parts of the world in his bid to make the congress a success. A perusal of the list of those on the various committees and in charge of symposia and other

activities reads like a "Who's Who" of herpetology. The well-known herpetologists most conspicuous at the congress were those conspicuous in their absence rather than presence. However, one must expect some people might have other commitments that would prevent them from attending such a congress when so many are expected to show up.

By gaining the services of herpetologists the world over, Tyler was able to promote the congress as perhaps the biggest strictly scientific herpetological get-together since the Canterbury gathering and certainly for some years to come.

So what was it? The program in essence consisted of about six concurrent symposia based on specific themes, namely "Evolution and Genetics," "Systematics and Distribution," "Physiology," "Ecology," "Ethology" and "Conservation and Captive Care." These symposia were then subdivided further into subthemes. For example the "Conservation and Captive Care" symposium was divided into "Endangered Species," "The Role of Amateurs in Herpetology," "Diseases and Husbandry" and "Ethics of Trade in Herpetology." These categories essentially were so as to give some order to the placement of papers by delegates. For the most part, the symposia ran concurrently in adjacent lecture halls, with each lecture (paper presentation) lasting about 15 minutes (and strictly timed to run concurrently). Attendees were able to freely move from hall to hall to hear and see the speakers of their choice. This, the main "official" part of the congress, ran smoothly. Occasionally some speakers had such popularity that there was difficulty in getting everyone into the given lecture hall, but these instances were relatively rare compared to the overall number of papers presented. In general the Australian speakers and those who spoke on "Australian" topics got the bigger crowds, probably because there were more Australians at the congress than other groups.

A common complaint some visitors had was that they wanted to see more than one paper at a time and were forced to choose one presentation over another. Valid though this complaint was, it wasn't feasible to stage all presentations in single-file order. As it was, the congress ran for about a week, and including special sessions, posters and so on, there were probably about five hundred presentations. Most of these were summarized in the abstracts. A copy of these abstracts was presented to all who attended and provided enough information to assist those who missed given presentations for one reason or another. For those who missed the congress completely, these abstracts are also available from the World Congress of Herpetology, for a reasonable price. I strongly recommend purchase of these to all interested.

Besides the concurrent papers, presented most days, the mornings commenced with plenary sessions in a hall large enough to accommodate all the delegates. Here general



The star of the show—Michael Tyler

announcements were made and some (longer) papers by particularly well-known herpetologists were presented. The choice of presenters and papers for these sessions didn't always seem to match the interests of the bulk of the audience and I'd certainly question the methods by which these presenters were selected. Perhaps the selection procedure for plenary session speakers could be altered in future world congresses.

In reality the 15-minute presentations gave most listeners little more than a general overview of the topic being presented. However these talks were usually of high quality, and usually accompanied by excellent slides, graphics and so on, as required. The herpetological material provided at the congress by presenters was more than enough to direct attendees further should they share interests in a given field.

As one who sat through many presentations (and didn't present a paper myself), I had the opportunity to unbiasedly assess a number of speakers and I make a few comments here. Although most speakers were top-grade and I'd hate to give each a score, particularly good ones were typified by the UK's Mark O'Shea. In his talks he presents excellent slides and commentary, at a speed fast enough so as not to bore an audience, but not so fast as to confuse them either. His enthusiasm for his subject radiates through to his audience. Rick Shine (Australia) is often able to present detailed statistical information to his audience without boring them because of his ability to simplify a graph into words that anyone can understand. Unfortunately, a few speakers had tendencies to speak in monotones, use unnecessarily complex jargon, and perhaps worst of all, face the screen or monitor (away from the audience) for the entire presentation. I make these comments as a listener only so that those who speak at other gatherings may be able to take note.

However, in spite of the high quality of the lectures, the true value of this Second World Congress of Herpetology was in the informal gatherings and general meeting and mingling times. Once again Tyler and his organizers must be commended here. The organized activities all tended to bring attendees together in a friendly atmosphere for the duration of the congress. People of like interests were able to meet unimpeded throughout the congress in excellent surroundings. The free

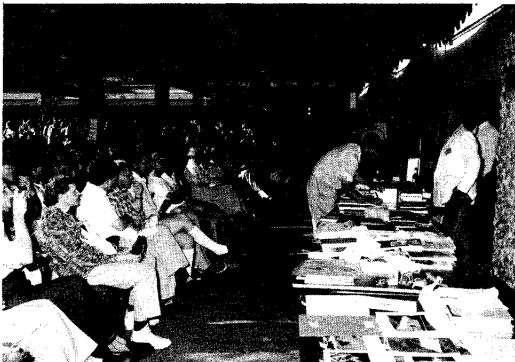
flow of ideas and meeting of persons in such a setting can only benefit herpetology everywhere. I'd hate to print a list of all the people I've known for years but had never met prior to this congress. Often you'd find yourself not knowing who you were standing next to until you saw their name tag, only to find that it was someone you've been corresponding with for the last ten years. I'm sure many others found themselves in the same boat.

A huge number of other activities, expos and so on were organized as part of the congress or to coincide with it. A New Year's Eve dinner at a winery was attended by about 600 of the 800 attendees. I'm sure a good night was had by all. After that, a fellow herper from Australia, Fred Rossignoli, and I roller-bladed through the city streets and nightclubs of Adelaide, crashing into herpetologists everywhere we went. Like many others, we didn't get to bed before the sun rose. Fortunately, there were no lectures the next day.

Timed to coincide with the congress was the Narama reptile display at the nearby Wayville Showgrounds. Organized by Robin Noye and others with the South Australian Herpetological Group (SAHG) and Adelaide Snake-Catchers (one of two local snake rescue groups), Narama was a well produced expo of Australian reptiles and related things. For many delegates to the congress Narama presented the best opportunity to see a large number of Australian reptiles in one place. The most popular exhibit was the recently rediscovered Adelaide blue-tongue lizard, *Tiliqua adelaidensis*. Adelaide Zoo and the Museum, both immediately adjacent to the site of the congress, had special displays to coincide with the congress.

Also timed to coincide with the start of the congress was the theft of an adult scrub python, *Morelia amethystina*, from the nearby Cleland Wildlife Park. Fortunately the snake, along with other previously stolen reptiles, was recovered when the police raided a house on another matter. It turned out that the man charged, Mark Lemmon, had nothing to do with the congress or attendees. The matter comes up for court hearing on 2 February.

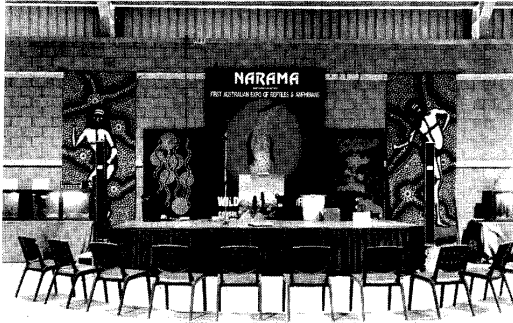
Prior to the congress Australian authorities received 12 applications from overseas-based herpetologists to export reptiles from Australia for scientific purposes. All 12 were



Auction in progress



Narama reptile exhibit



Narama

rejected. The reason was simple: "Australia won't allow the export of wildlife for any reason." Such a blinkered attitude does nothing for Australia's conservation of wildlife or for our international reputation. It only serves to increase the incentive for otherwise law-abiding people to break wildlife laws. Such did in fact occur. One delegate got busted for bringing a few preserved specimens into the country, while another was caught for importing live freshwater turtles. A third attendee was picked up for carrying dope (marijuana / Indian hemp / cannabis) when strip-searched upon arrival at Sydney's Mascot Airport.

Federal and state wildlife and customs authorities had a full-scale national operation planned around the congress. Officials got hold of a list of all attendees to the congress and many were closely watched on the presumption of guilt when they were merely going about their lawful business. Two separate people complained of being followed by officials in their cars immediately after the congress. Strip-searches and baggage searches were more vigorous than usual. An American delegate gave me an electronic tracking chip placed under a wheel on his suitcase by officials without his knowledge when he arrived in Australia. It isn't certain how many others were marked this way. However, I cannot help but think that if the Australian authorities weren't so tight on the legal import and export of reptiles and other wildlife, then perhaps they wouldn't have to waste so much money on enforcement — or is it just a case of bureaucrats doing this to justify their existence.

Bill Love of Glades Herpetoculture didn't win the popularity stakes with local officials when he got widespread media coverage (TV, radio, newspapers) of his attack on local wildlife laws. However, most of his arguments were soundly based. A local herpetologist, Peter Mirtschin, presented a paper which showed that, taking into account all the money spent by wildlife bureaucrats on wildlife licensing laws and seizing illegal fauna in Australia over the last ten years, the same amount of wildlife could have been saved by shooting just one feral cat (the cost being the bullet). He also produced a table that showed a direct correlation (linear relationship) between an increase in wildlife licensing laws and extinctions in Australia. As one has risen, so has the other. Mirtschin's paper clearly showed that things in Australia need fixing up urgently.

Towards the end of the congress there was a meeting where the "official business" — resolutions and so on — took place. Mike Tyler gave an overview of how the congress had run. After starting the project with a debt left by the organizers of the first world congress, Tyler had managed to stage the second one and turn a substantial profit, which was to be used to help run the third. Importantly, Tyler had gained so much corporate sponsorship in Australia that he'd managed to keep the registration cost down to less than \$500 (Australian) per person. Conceivably the registration could have been as high as \$1200 (Australian) without the sponsorship. I for one would not have been able to afford to go had he not managed to pull such a feat and like most attendees to the congress, I hope that Tyler will be duly recognized for the fantastic effort he put in. For those who missed this congress, I think the next one will be in Rio, some years hence, and I'm sure Tyler has set a new standard. Start saving for that one now!

Answers to the February Herp-Acrostic

The quotation in last month's Herp-Acrostic was taken from pages 215-16 of *Reptiles and Amphibians* by [Zdenek] Vogel: "Nearly all reptiles and amphibians are suited for vivarium life. Only certain very specialized species will now and again cause serious, or even insuperable, difficulties. It is no great problem to hatch the eggs of some reptiles and to rear the young to maturity."

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| A. Venter | N. Africa |
| B. Ophoid | O. Necrosis |
| C. Grace Olive Wiley | P. Dumeril's boa |
| D. Elapid | Q. Anguine |
| E. Lesser siren | R. Mahmoud Latifi |
| F. Rusty Lizard | S. Puff |
| G. Eagle | T. Hinge |
| H. Parthenogenetic | U. Instituto Butantan |
| I. Temple viper | V. Bisect |
| J. Isohyet | W. Ivory Coast |
| K. Lyre | X. Arrau |
| L. Eft | Y. Nile |
| M. Seps | Z. Salamander's wool |