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Obituary

Horacio Schneider (1948-2018)

Professor Horacio Schneider, best known for his work on the phylogeny of New World monkeys, was a relentless advocate for the advancement of science in the Amazon. In publishing over 150 research articles, supervising over 50 graduate students and holding along the years various administrative positions at the Federal University of Pará (UFPA), Schneider helped shape policy and establish excellence in biodiversity research in Northern Brazil. With his death on September 27, at 70, the Amazon lost one of its champions.

Born in the city of São Paulo in 1948, Schneider entered UFPA in 1969 to study medicine. Influenced by the research of Francisco Mauro Salzano and Theodosius Dobzhansky, Schneider's interests quickly shifted to biology and he became a voluntary student researcher for Manuel Ayres, studying immune system diversity in indigenous populations.

He pursued both his Masters and PhD degrees at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, under the supervision of the prominent Brazilian geneticist Francisco Mauro Salzano. In 1984, in his doctoral work, Schneider used protein electrophoresis to study protein polymorphisms in buffaloes.

By the late 80's, assessment of variation at the DNA level was the dominant method used to measure genetic differences for generation of phylogenetic trees. In 1990, Schneider joined the laboratory of Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza at Stanford University, where he learned and later applied molecular phylogenetics to unravel evolutionary relationships in primates.

Upon his return to UFPA in 1992, Schneider had a collaborative grant with Morris Goodman at Wayne State University, on the broad theme of molecular systematics studies in primates. The collaboration lasted nearly a decade, resulting in five PhD theses and numerous publications, including the first New World primate phylogeny based on DNA variation in 1993.

In 1998, Schneider threw himself into a new challenge: to establish a Biology Research Center in Bragança, a small town in the northeast coast of the State of Pará. During the early 2000's, his group was supported by research funding from the Millenium Institute program of the Brazilian Government, as well as from a collaborative partnership between Germany and Brazil (jointly coordinated with Ulrich Saint-Paul, University of Bremen), to conduct research on mangrove dynamics and management (MADAM). This represented a new avenue of investigation and his interests in phylogenetics and biogeography greatly expanded to include a myriad of Amazonian invertebrate and vertebrate species. In 2005, Schneider was a visiting researcher at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, where he worked with Guillermo Ortí studying phylogenetic relationships in Amazonian cichlids.

Schneider held multiple administrative roles in his career, yet he is mostly known for his role as Vice-Rector of the UFPA from 2009 to 2017, where he helped spearhead the expansion of infrastructure on UFPA campuses across the State via the federal funding program known as REUNI. Schneider was president of the Brazilian Society of Primatology from 1991 to 1994 and also largely respected among the Brazilian community of geneticists for being twice elected as president of the Brazilian Society of Genetics (2000 to 2002 and 2006 to 2008).

Over his career, Professor Schneider received numerous academic awards and distinctions, including some of the highest honors granted by Brazilian institutions. He was a full member of the Brazilian National Academy of Sciences since 2002 and received in 2002 the title of Commander of the Order of Scientific Merit (medal given in person by president Fernando Henrique Cardoso) and was later promoted in 2010 to the Grã-Cruz class. He was also a member of the advisory committee on Genetics at The Brazilian Council of Research and Development (CNPq).

In 1989, the journal Nature published an article entitled "An Amazon University for Amazonia", where it described the Schneider research team's effort as "quite heroic", highlighting the difficulties surrounding research in the Amazon, describing how "The laboratory roof sometimes leaks, the water and electricity supply are unreliable and 90 percent of their electrophoretic reagents have to be imported. The University is too poor to afford journal subscriptions". The article also underscored the enthusiasm of the research group: "the team is great in spirit". His resilience in face of adversity was a hallmark of his academic career and personal life.

On a more personal level, Professor Schneider was an elegant soft-spoken man with an ever-present smile, a witty sense of humor, and a fondness for music and poetry. He was a caring husband, father and grandfather, and an inspi-

ration to his students and collaborators throughout the years. He also possessed an unabating and contagious optimism, a character trait much needed in times such as these. In his passing, science in the Amazon lost one of its most powerful voices. A tree fell in the forest and was heard by everyone.

Igor Schneider
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