



TRIBUTES TO DR. VALERIUS GEIST
(1938 – 2021)



Beth MacCallum

Chair, 22nd Symposium of the Northern Wild Sheep and Goat Council, Alberta, November 2020

As a student, I never missed a Valerius Geist lecture. The lecture may have started out as a discussion on biology of a specific ungulate, but it never stayed there and soon incorporated environmental, social, and cultural context. Val loved to share knowledge and engage with discussion, the more complex the better. We know Val as an icon in the world of bighorn sheep; even now, his 1971 book “*Mountain Sheep, A Study in Behaviour and Evolution*” is relevant. Val obtained a PhD in Zoology in 1966 from the University of British Columbia after studying Stone’s sheep behaviour in the Cassiar Mountains of British Columbia. He then studied under Konrad Lorenz at the Max Planck Institute in Germany as a post-doctoral fellow. Subsequently, he moved to a position at the Faculty of Environmental Design, University of Calgary. This was the perfect place for Val to explore ideas and interact with faculty and students with a diverse set of skills and background – urbanists, architects, planners, economists, lawyers, and scientists. This integration was hard. Students had to participate in group projects with three of the four streams: environmental science,

architecture, planning, and industrial design. Val was challenged and he thrived. Val was a very engaging person and always available to answer any question no matter how many times he must have heard each question before. Few people have the ability to move skillfully between art and science and in fact bring the two together. His keen eye for observation of the natural world was translated not only into science but interpreted through the lens of cultural symbolism and expressed in art. His book "*Life Strategies, Human Evolution, Environmental Design, Toward a Biological Theory of Health*" was written because of the problems he encountered when teaching graduate students of highly diverse backgrounds aspects of human biology relevant to environmental design. Val was one of the few people who could tackle such a demanding subject.

Valerius Geist was a prolific writer producing numerous scientific papers and books as well as contributing dozens of popular articles to outdoor and natural history magazines. Topics ranged from wildlife ecology, behaviour, evolution, the biology of health, and wildlife conservation policy. Conservation became a major focus of his work. Val was a serious hunter and understood the importance of the North American Model of wildlife conservation. He wrote about it profusely, co-editing books on "*Wildlife Conservation Policy*" and "*The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation*".

Val met his beloved wife Renate while at university. They married in 1961 and raised a loving family of three children. He was a gracious host and treated visitors as if they were royalty, plying them with food and drink that he and Renate had prepared themselves. Val was born February 2, 1938, in Russia. His family was disrupted by WWII and Val ended up in Germany with his mother, aunt, and grandmother. The family eventually reunited and immigrated to Canada in 1953. Val died July 6, 2021, at 83 years of age. He lived a full life - full of curiosity, wonder and exploration and he used his intellect to its fullest. To remind us of how special he was and how wonderful it was to have known him, he left behind an unfinished book on human evolution entitled "*Condemned to Art and Insanity. Our Natural History.*"

Kevin Hurley

Northern Wild Sheep and Goat Council (volunteer) Executive Director (1992-present)

Like so many others, Val Geist was an inspiration, mentor, and role model for me, for so many years. My lifelong fascination with mountain sheep and mountain goats drew me like a magnet to Val, who published, wrote, and spoke so prolifically. Although my time in the field with Val was very limited, his books, articles, columns, and manifestos always grabbed my attention, and piqued my interest. Those of us who love mountain ungulates were so blessed to have a man like Val in our midst; we may never know another like him, and we thank him for all that he left with us.

Eldon Bruns

Alberta Fish and Wildlife (retired)

Yes, I was his first grad student. After taking one of his courses in 1968, I talked him into letting me complete a Masters degree in one year rather than the usual two or three by doing my field work in the winter rather than the summer. Val provided me with a University of Calgary truck and a rental snowmobile. I was 28 years old, married, and had worked as a Hydrographic surveyor for 9 years, so I guess he decided I might make it. He only came out in the field with me for one

day since the winter of 1968-69 was the most severe winter we had in the previous 30 years. Val had opposition from the other professors for letting me risk my life that winter, but he generously provided me letters of recommendation to help me get biology jobs in New Zealand, Australia, and Alberta. He was a tireless field worker and prodigious author. He likely wrote hundreds of wise pages for every hour he spent in the field!

Mark Boyce

Professor of Ecology, University of Alberta

Val and I shared many interests and spent many delightful hours talking about them. Often we disagreed, which made his conversations even more engaging. I first met Val in 1975 when I was a Ph.D. student at Yale where Val had invited himself to give a seminar, and I was delegated to take him to the Faculty Club for dinner. I recall our discussion about antlers in female caribou and we argued about Val's idea that those antlers were important to females in late winter when they could dominate over males at feeding craters. Before I moved to Alberta Val arranged a few days visit in 1998 with Norm Simmons at his ranch near Pincher Creek. Norm had initiated indigenous co-management of wildlife in the Northwest Territories when he was Director of Fish and Wildlife for the territorial government. As always, we learned valuable insights from hours of discussion with Val about the very fabric of wildlife management in North America – grand scale insights that evolved to become the “North American Model of Wildlife Conservation.”

Alexander Sharif

Principal Engineer, Fluor Canada

I met Dr. Val Geist in 1994 in a lecture he was presenting on mule deer and our friendship continued until death took him away. When a man of his caliber dies, it is as though a library burned down. To my family and myself, Val was more than just a friend/mentor. Every question we ever asked him; whether it was on ungulate behavior, evolution of species, predator-prey relationship, or even common subjects such as wine, mushrooms, or berries was always answered accurately, patiently, and with gusto. I always said that after I read his answers, I felt I had taken a university crash course on the subject. Besides academic achievements, what made Val even more special was his treatment of others with utmost respect. Having been in his entourage of friends is one of my biggest blessings in life and I am glad I was able to host him on his last hunt in Nov 2020 here in Alberta.



November 2020
Alexander Sharif with Valerius Geist

Kirby Smith

Alberta Fish and Wildlife (retired)

I only met Val a few times. His contribution to wildlife science speaks for itself. In addition, he was always contemplating the natural world and passing on his ideas. Moreover, I thought he epitomized the penultimate scientist by constantly challenging his own ideas. I remember him stating, "you know what I said before about a particular subject - well I think that was wrong and based on new information, I now have a different take".

Marco Festa-Bianchet

Université de Sherbrooke

Val was different. He did not fit the mold of a North American University Professor, or of a conventional scientist. His mind was constantly generating ideas and his ability to present those ideas with great authority was unparalleled. His artistry helped both his science and his communications with the general public. Val was courageous in defending his ideas, even when his opposition to game ranching brought death threats. Events since have shown he was completely right on that issue. One of the creators of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, I always thought he was deeply affected by his knowledge of Central European management, helped by his ability to read German and Russian. A person of great integrity, he was also very kind and conversations with him were always entertaining.

Shane P. Mahoney

CEO, Conservation Visions Inc.

Dr. Valerius Geist was an extraordinary man, gifted intellectually, and blessed with a prodigious capacity for work. His mark on North American conservation is indelible. We became very close, and I knew him as a mentor, colleague, and friend; and I valued him more in all these regards as time passed. His warmth and joy in conversation were an unending source of inspiration to all of us who knew him and a reminder that to be human means to care about other people, their lives, and ideas. To walk with him in nature was to be in the presence of someone who truly cared and who was forever fascinated by the wondrous complexity and nuanced beauty of the world we inhabit and share. His passing represents a deep and profound personal loss, and it is hard to comprehend that it will never again be possible to see that wonderful smile or sit quietly on the phone or in person and listen to his latest insights. There are few who will ever match the breadth and depth of his contributions to our understandings of wild ungulates, of course; but his intellectual legacy is far more wide-reaching and envelops a virtual universe of thinking on the wildness of humanity and humanity's responsibility to wildness. Sadly, it will be impossible not to miss him always. Like others who knew him well, I consider having known Dr. Geist as I did to be one of the true blessings of my life and career. Like all forces of nature, many will forage and discover new pathways to purpose and understanding in his wake.

Susan Lingle

Professor, Department of Biology, University of Winnipeg

I did my Master's in Environmental Design at UCalgary in the mid-1980s, with Val as supervisor. It was a treat to stop by Val's house to pick up a book or paper. He and his wife, Renate, were always welcoming and engaging. One term, Val held a small class on the Evolution of Mammals at his house one evening each week. The atmosphere was

warm and filled with interesting ideas. Renate invariably offered us freshly baked and delicious German coffee cake. I was always impressed by Renate, equal parts grace, and keen intellect.

Val gave his research students incredible independence and was always brimming with positivity. I decided to work with Bill Wishart's herd of hybrid deer for my Master's thesis, and this involved moving 16 deer from Edmonton to the Calgary Zoo in a horse trailer, making the return trip a year and a half later with what had multiplied into 33 deer; building fences, runways and obstacle courses so I could film the deer in a study of their locomotion. This was not your typical student project, but I don't remember Val uttering a doubting word. Since this note is for a sheep and goat group, I'll add that Bill Wishart was pretty darn supportive too – this project and the logistics required a major investment of time and hard work for Bill and many of his colleagues.

Val was off the charts when it came to his many talents. Scientist. Artist. Public speaker. Nearly always controversial. I was reminded of one of these talents just yesterday, when I went back to his classic descriptive chapter on mule deer behaviour published in the 1981 book edited by O.C. Wallmo. This is a paper I regularly dig up to introduce new students to deer behaviour. Val had the ability to notice and describe fine details of an animal's behaviour remarkably accurately – from feeding to dominance interactions, courtship, scent-marking, to antipredator behaviour. I really don't know how he acquired the breadth and depth of observation revealed in that paper. It is remarkable. And those illustrations!

Bill Wishart

Alberta Fish and Wildlife, (retired)

Val and I had many spirited discussions over the years about his developing hypotheses. I will never forget running downhill from a ram that had learned to butt people to try to dislodge salt they may have been carrying. This was in Banff during Val's behavioural studies. Concerned over his 'Teutonic English', Val asked me to read and provide constructive criticism of the first and second drafts of his 1971 book "Mountain Sheep, a Study in Behaviour and Evolution". He was a gifted artist and illustrated his articles and books with skill. We remained great friends.

Jim Bailey

Belgrade, Montana

I first met Val when I was on sabbatical leave at Calgary University. He and his family were exceptional hosts for our family, including a day of ice-fishing and jackrabbit hunting. Our friendships lasted throughout their lives. Renate and my wife, Nan, exchanged letters often and Val and I corresponded with the internet. We visited them at Port Alberni and were treated to roast bear.

Val was the most intellectual person I have known. His interests were broad and thoughtfully deep. He was a true philosopher – a lover of knowledge. Over lunches in the Calgary University cafeteria, we talked about what Val was thinking about each day. He was so intense, that one could not deter him from his subject. At the time, he was working on "Life Strategies, Human Evolution, Environmental Design: Toward a Biological Theory of Health", probably his most important, yet under-appreciated work.

Val was unaffected by his broad reputation. He always had sincere interests in differing points of view. At home, there was no pretense. Visiting them at Port Alberni, I recall arising early to find Val, in a bathrobe, feeding scrambled eggs to his turkeys. We also had wonderful home-made wine during that visit.

I miss Val, not being able to “bounce ideas” off him as I once did. His works deserve rereading for a long time. They contain much more than “just wildlife”. But habitat managers who reread “Mountain Sheep” will again find that a complete bighorn range consists of six seasonal ranges, juxtaposed, and connected with migration corridors. Val is telling us that too many of our bighorn herds suffer with less.

Darryn Epp

Dr. Geist was a scientific visionary, performing research through a larger diagnostic lens than most others in his time and space. His intellect and curiosity of the way species evolution impacted our understanding of ethology was impactful. His characteristic passion to share his learnings and an ability to communicate them to a wide diversity of audience was key to his ability to deeply influence so many throughout his journey.

Wayne E. Heimer

Alaska Department of Fish and game (retired)

Valerius Geist always made me feel like what I thought was important, and that I was actually his friend and colleague. This, for better or worse, encouraged me to think further. I loved the man.

Our final great adventure was an elk hunt together in Alberta with a mutual friend, Pat Long. Pat had built several “stands” around a hay field he owns near the Peace River. The days spent sitting in one or another of these stands with Pat or Val as they shared their knowledge and impressions of what we were seeing in nature were precious for me. Can you imagine a biologist’s thrill at having two founts of local and intercontinental knowledge and creative ideas “captive” for hours while numerous deer came and went? Priceless!

Cliff White

Parks Canada biologist (retired)

Thanks to Val Geist

Val Geist thought big: Big in time – hundreds of thousands of years; big in space – continental patterns of species evolution; big in numbers of species – he could recognize and draw thousands of them, ancient to current. But most importantly, he thought big in the ancient, current, and future roles of human societies in the evolution and conservation of this global biodiversity.



June 22, 2021

Dr. Valerius Geist discussing mountain goat skulls collected during his time doing behavioral studies in the Spatsizi, British Columbia. Darryn Epp took this photo when he and his partner Cathy visited Val at his Port Alberni home.

Over the decades, I was fortunate to talk with Val about our joint interests of the day. In the 1980s, we discussed cultural, prescribed burning of his mountain sheep study areas in the Cascade valley in Banff and the Spatsizi valley in northern BC. In the '90s he advised on helicopter tour impacts on mountain goats in Banff and Assiniboine parks. Later, we had some great discussions about how to manage the 300 or so super-habituated elk that had taken possession of Banff townsite. Most recently, we shared our thoughts on how the socio-economic patterns of humans in the southwest from 1000 AD to 1600 AD could have influenced the western edge of bison range near the Gulf of Mexico. I think no one was more aware than Val that western North America's diversity of wildlife is the legacy of human long-term keystone role. Our species evolved as a valley bottom, but wide-ranging omnivore, skilled in communal hunting, fishing, gathering, culturing, burning, and always keeping a deep symbiotic relationship with dogs, both wild and tame. By filling this niche, we created living space for species ranging from bison to caribou, to bighorn sheep, to aspens, and beaver.

Today, as the Anthropocene creates a globalized economy, destroying long-term, more localized human subsistence patterns, we desperately need visionaries like Val Geist who can put this massive change in the context of big space and big time. He had so many interests, wrote so well, and connected with so many people in so many different ways. He will be deeply missed.

Paul R. Krausman

Emeritus Professor, University of Arizona

Knowing Valerius (Val) Geist

As an undergraduate and graduate student, I was well aware of Val and his work with bighorn sheep and was honored to meet him. After the meeting, we communicated often, and he visited me, my graduate students, and bighorn sheep study sites when I was a professor at the University of Arizona. I can still see and hear him speaking skillfully about bighorn sheep as he stood atop a rock in the Harquahala Mountains. His knowledge of wildlife worldwide was legendary, but his humanity and activities as a responsible world citizen were more important. Val was always kind and considerate of others. He may not have always agreed with everyone, but always had justification and literature to back up his reasoning. He was a gentleman and true scholar and I learned much from him.

Equally important, Val loved his family and life. Hearing him talk about his wife and life were topics few discuss, but they were woven into the fabric of his being. I was fortunate to work in the wildlife arena with Val and to see that his profession was only one part of the life he lived so well.

Denis Chabot

Ecophysiological, Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Maurice Lamontagne Institute, Mont-Joli, QC, Canada

I was a Ph.D. student with Val in the 80s and early 90s. Encountering Val when I started was quite a shock. I had never met a professor who could be so animated and switch from talking about animal behavior to cooking to hunting, remaining passionate and knowledgeable on all of these subjects! He kept surprising me when I took some classes he was teaching. Each time he started with three huge blackboards, absolutely empty, and a pile of coloured chalk. Before the class was over, all three blackboards were full of fantastic drawings, each one would have taken me an evening to complete (if I could complete it), with a model to guide me. Val drew those from memory while telling

us stories and concepts, as if it was as simple a task as breathing. Every class, a large number of large mammals, living or extinct, took shape before our very eyes. Val was a very charismatic and skilled teacher; this is for sure.

During my Ph.D. under Val, I saw a brilliant man driven by passion and his love of large mammals, but also one who enjoyed controversy. He had high expectations of what biologists should do: they should further knowledge, for sure, but they should make sure this knowledge had concrete applications for our fellow citizens. And Val did all this with an infinite supply of energy. Honestly, I was humbled and wondered if I could live up to his standards.

Helen Schwantje

BC Wildlife Branch (retired)

My first exposure to Dr. Valerius Geist was to read about his work on Stone's sheep, to me a species I was entranced with due to their remoteness and the relatively little known about them. What he did for the species was brought home to me in the late 1980s when I visited the jewel-like Gladys Lake, a new ecological reserve. His cabin was on a little islet at the base of a huge slope that was home to the herd of Stone's he had observed and described. He had sat on the porch of the cabin, a luxurious location to study animal behaviour. I was quite jealous and told him so when we eventually met Val became a friend. He loved to ponder and work out the whys animals do what they do. Wolves, sheep, humans, it did not matter. We had some wonderfully challenging and thought-provoking conversations. I told him often, "Val, you think too much". But I didn't mean it, I was jealous (again). He was a quintessential gentleman who loved his work, his family, his friends but mostly the love of his life, Renate. I'm so very glad we met, shared Stone's sheep, had those discussions, and a friendship. Love to you Val, Helen

