

Dr Wolfgang Burhenne

A man for all seasons

1924 – 2017

A personal tribute

Wolfgang Burhenne, who died in January at the age of 92, was a towering figure in the environmental movement for most of the 70 years since the end of the 2nd World War. Above all he was a good man and a rounded human being. He exemplified what it was to be a patriotic German, a committed European and a visionary citizen of the world at the same time. IUCN was his heartbeat. International environmental law enshrined in conventions was his passion and to a considerable extent his creation.

For his achievements in this sphere he was widely known. Principal among them were his founding and long-time chairmanship of IUCN's Commission on Environmental Law and, to provide it with the necessary practical support, the IUCN Environmental Law Centre in Bonn. They have attracted other tributes. What is perhaps less known is his profound involvement in hunting and his insights into the sustainable use of wildlife as a conservation tool. These and his rich humanity are the subject of this brief tribute. Although written as a personal memoir I hope it will echo the sentiments of colleagues.

Few contemporary readers may be aware that war broke out before Wolfgang had ended his formal education. Thus he found himself in the German *Wehrmacht* as a teenager, but before very long his courage and ethical convictions turned him into a resister against Hitler and the Nazis. He then spent much of the war as a concentration camp inmate at Dachau.

Emerging from that situation in 1945 he did not, as his later career might suggest, seek out the traditional German path of a university to acquire a first degree and doctorate, although he did begin some forestry studies. Instead he joined the Bavarian Hunting organisation and began working on laws for conservation and the regulation of hunting – for a good reason as a personal anecdote will explain.

This was to benefit the present writer many years later in a totally unforeseen way. At the IUCN Barcelona Congress in 2008 Wolfgang enrolled me as an honorary member of *Schutzgemeinschaft Deutsches Wild* so that I could debate and vote on motions in the Members' Assembly.

Schutzgemeinschaft was a body he created in the post-war era and it still retained IUCN membership. Because I intervened in Congress debates with reasonable frequency under this flag, the President of the Assembly, Valli Moosa of South Africa, had to call out the name of the organisation more often than he would have wished, since he struggled to get his tongue round it. Meeting me in the gent's toilet one day, Valli asked what was this

organisation with a funny name that I was representing and would it be okay if in future he was able to call it “SDW”?

This gave me the chance to explain that Wolfgang had founded the body in post-War Germany to take a stand against the forces of the occupying powers whose unconstrained off-duty recreational hunting practices were playing havoc with German wildlife populations. In such a situation all but one in a million would have kept their heads down, but not Wolfgang. What he did was typical of his courage and imagination.

Another experience of Barcelona illustrates a different feature of his character. We worked together on several motions for adoption by the Assembly and took an interest in those promoted by others which affected policy areas of concern. I recall one tabled by a small ngo on the subject of conservation in conflict situations, which suffered from drafting problems. Wolfgang was deeply committed to peace-making initiatives and so he suggested that, instead of proposing critical amendments, we paid a visit to the desk of the young lady proponent to offer our help, which we duly did. At this time Wolfgang was 83 and knew everyone important in the UN field from the Secretary General downwards but he was never too busy or too remote to offer assistance to anyone who needed it.

My first encounter with him in IUCN circles was at the Montreal Congress in 1996 when the embryonic re-constituted Sustainable Use Specialist Group was finding its feet under the redoubtable chairmanship of Professor Marshall Murphree. The SUSG leadership was in almost constant session and was promoting a bottom-up devolved regional approach in a very *dirigiste* kind of way. I got involved, in the absence of the official European representative, and discovered that SUSG was extremely hostile to a motion tabled by Wolfgang for the Congress calling for the new SUSG to develop a short policy statement on sustainable use and conservation for consideration by the next Congress. In spite of some pressure Wolfgang did not back down and the motion was passed, since the SUSG could find no coherent reason to oppose it.

Thus it was due to Wolfgang’s prescience that IUCN ended up by adopting what was a truly short *Policy Statement on the Sustainable Use of Wild Living Resources* at the Amman Congress in 2000. To produce this outcome the SUSG Steering Committee had to boil down a draft from the Secretariat of some 5 pages to the one pager that was finally passed.

Wolfgang, in his capacity as an ordinary member of the European Sustainable Use Specialist Group (ESUSG), made one more contribution to the Policy Statement. His simple response to a consultation in ESUSG was that the draft was not bad but it was not a policy statement. As ESUSG Chair I thought about this for a considerable time before it struck me that we in the SUSG Steering Committee had produced a methodological description rather than a fundamental case for sustainable use as a conservation tool.

This was the origin of what for many is the critical sentence in the Policy Statement: "Use of wild living resources, if sustainable, is an important conservation tool because the social and economic benefits derived from such use provide incentives for people to conserve them." Somewhat bizarrely the first draft was written on the back of an envelope between two stations on the London tube when the writer was en route to an ESUSG Committee at the Linnaean Society in Picadilly.

One final reminiscence of Wolfgang takes us to the Austrian Alps. The Wild Fauna Working Group of ESUSG arranged a meeting which began in the somewhat lugubrious setting of the Bavarian Hunting Museum in Munich, overlooked by several hundred stag trophy heads. For the field stage we moved southwards across the Austrian border to Achenkirch, where the Unterberg family owned a mountain hunting reserve. Wolfgang took part and revealed that this was where he indulged his passion for shooting chamois, the elusive ungulate of the high peaks better known to the world for the quality of its hide. We saw chamois and red deer in a winter feeding project being studied by our colleague Dr Fritz Reimoser of Vienna. After a chilly day in the foothills it was a surprise and delight to return to the rather sophisticated village *gasthof* and find that our host for a wonderful and truly *gemütlich* dinner was none other than our dear Wolfgang in an extraordinary act of generosity.

It is a truism that we shall not see his like again. He was a terrific colleague with a warm heart and captivating smile. He possessed a brilliant insight into the need for articulating policy in way that led to action. He knew and cherished nature in the field as well as the conference hall. His legacy was never more needed than in our current geo-political world of shifting sands, where truth and integrity face tough challenges. He represented the best of IUCN. Thank you, Wolfgang, from the bottom of our hearts.

Robin Sharp
Chair Emeritus of the former European Sustainable Use Specialist Group