

Obituary: R Dennis King

May 1942 – January 2002

Dennis King was a generous man. Generous with his time, knowledge and expertise. Dennis was always willing to share his knowledge and enthusiasm, particularly for goannas, with fellow scientists and others interested in nature.

Born in Calgary (Canada) in 1942, Dennis moved to Vancouver at a young age, went to Magee High School, and then to the University of British Columbia to undertake Bachelors' and Masters' degrees in zoology, which he completed in 1968. He subsequently accepted an Australian Wool Board scholarship to undertake a PhD at the University of Adelaide. Initially intending to study birds, however, he saw the light early and changed to goannas. His PhD topic 'Temperature regulation in the Sand goanna *Varanus gouldii* (Gray)' was completed in 1977, and was awarded in 1978.

After completing his formal qualifications, Dennis worked with the Western Australian Agricultural Protection Board. Much of his work focussed on the biology and control of rabbits and other feral exotic species such as goats. He was a major player in the research into sodium monofluoroacetate (1080), a naturally occurring substance in some Australian plants of the genus *Gastrolobium*, and the resulting tolerance of some native species to the toxin. Because of this tolerance, 1080 has been used for many years to control introduced vertebrate pests without posing a risk to native animals. The use of 1080 to control foxes, in particular, has led to the increase in numbers of endemic species of small animals in some areas, and the removal of some of these from the list of endangered species. Dennis considered his work on fluoroacetate-tolerance in native species as his most important work outside his love of reptiles.

His 130 plus publications reflected his two areas of scientific interest; the management and control of vertebrate pests, and research into goannas. With Brian Green he published a book: 'Goannas: The Biology of Varanid Lizards', which is in its second edition. More recently he wrote, in association with Eric Pianka from the University of Texas, a section for a book on Komodo Dragons, a publication of the Smithsonian Institution. At the time of his death he was writing/editing a book with Eric Pianka, 'Varanoids of the World', which will address what is known about this fascinating genus of lizards.

After his retirement in 1996, Dennis developed his long standing links with the Western Australian Museum, becoming an Honorary Associate, and was often seen in the lower basement of the museum peering into bottles of preserved goannas, extracting ticks from their skin or parasites from their intestinal tract, or studying other tissues and organs. Dennis sustained an interest in the biology of goannas over a period of more than 30 years, and would readily share his wealth of knowledge with any one that would ask. His research



interests and his approach to life resulted in a wide circle of friends on many continents.

A vocal conservationist, Dennis willingly shared his views on how well we were managing the natural environment with whoever would listen. He enjoyed field trips to the remoter sections of the Australian bush, even when it became physically taxing because of complications resulting from his diabetes.

In his early years, Dennis was a keen sportsman, playing basketball and lacrosse and competing in athletics. In later years he remained a keen observer of a number of sports. He enjoyed good food of any sort, including the Asian varieties, good wine and good conversation.

Our memory of Dennis is commemorated in the specific epithet of *Varanus kingorum* (Storr), named in 1980 for Drs Dennis and Max King for their contributions to study of the Varanidae.

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