
Obituary

Homage to an Avant-Garde Conservation Leader, Navjot Sodhi

The unconventional Professor Navjot Singh Sodhi of the National University of Singapore died on 12 June 2011 of a particularly aggressive form of lymphoma and associated organ failure. He had been diagnosed only a few weeks before. The shock and suddenness of his loss reverberated through the conservation-biology community at lightning speed, aided by email lists and social media (e.g., a Facebook tribute page was posted within hours of his death). He was only 49 years old and still at the peak of a brilliant scientific career.

Anyone who knew Navjot Sodhi well, or even happened to chat with him over drinks at a conference, will understand what we mean by unconventional. From his choice of apparel (the characteristic backward baseball cap, tattered t-shirt, board shorts, and flip-flops) to his colorful language and unique, hyena-like laugh, Navjot did not in any way embody the academic stereotype. When once asked by a colleague how one should dress for an interview at the National University of Singapore, his deadpan response was “nude.” He also made it abundantly clear, with linguistic flourish, that he despised the epithet *Sir* and preferred instead to be addressed merely as Sodhi. How we loved his rogue disposition. He even displayed postmortem cheek—he was buried wearing his cap backwards.

But Navjot Sodhi was not just a colorful character. He was a typhoon-like force in conservation biology and was known far and wide as Dr. Southeast Asia for his tireless efforts to expose the astonishing pace at which biodiversity in that region is being imperiled. He was indisputably one of the top minds in our field, driving novel research and publishing on most aspects of tropical ecology and conservation. He was a leader by any metric one chooses: citations, invitations, publications, reputation, and the dizzying extent of many collaborations. He was unquestionably one of the key authorities in both innovative and basic conservation research, as well as avian ecology in general. At the time of his death, he had published over 130 peer-reviewed articles, many in the world's top-ranked conservation and general-science journals, and had written or edited 7 books (with at least 3 others nearing completion). Quite simply, if anybody wants to understand how Southeast Asian biodiversity



Photo courtesy of the National University of Singapore.

has been affected by humans, the most important place to start is Navjot Sodhi's influential contributions.

Navjot was not only a producer of seminal conservation science, he also actively fostered its dissemination as an editor for many peer-reviewed journals and topical volumes. He was an editor for 11 journals during his too-short career (*Conservation Biology*, *Biological Conservation*, *Environmental Conservation*, *Animal Conservation*, *Tropical Conservation Science*, *Pacific Conservation Biology*, *Biotropica*, *Ornithological Science*, *The Auk*, *Ecological Research*, and *The Raffles Bulletin of Zoology*) and was appointed in 2010 to the Faculty of 1000. In his senior editorial role at *Biological Conservation* he was directly responsible for handling hundreds of manuscripts each year. One of his greatest editorial achievements was the recent edited book *Conservation Biology for All* (2010, Oxford University Press), which features chapters by some of the sharpest minds in the discipline. This book was truly “for all” considering that he organized it to be made freely available electronically only 1 year after publication. Navjot

was most insistent that the people who needed this text most—students and scientists in the developing world—ought to have unfettered access to the core principles of conservation science.

Such accolades aside, Navjot Sodhi was much, much more than a publishing dynamo; he understood and acted on many of the important social and economic problems with which conservation professionals grapple. He was a scientist of application more than theory, generally preferring to pass on the “modeling stuff” to his more numerically obsessed collaborators with a casual wave of his hand. Moving from his roots in entomology to ornithology and then to a general conservation-biology theme, Navjot’s work ultimately focused heavily on the policy changes needed to slow the Anthropocene biodiversity crisis, epitomized by the myriad environmental tragedies besetting the Asia Pacific region. For instance, he wrote extensively on how to achieve better governance in managing tropical forests, regulating the international trade in endangered species, promoting indigenous custodianship of biodiversity, curing the plague of corruption in governments and corporations, and even promoting the need to empower women in the fight for biodiversity preservation. He was willing to roll up his sleeves to tackle real grassroots issues—something few scientists engage in—and he understood how critical this task was.

Navjot’s research and teaching often focused on a quest to achieve both biodiversity conservation and improve the fate of underprivileged people living in and around conservation areas. If one gazes beyond the impending specter of global climate change, the root causes of most other threats to natural systems are primarily social and economic in origin and include human population growth, poverty, chronic shortages of resources dedicated to conservation, and rampant corruption. As developing countries strive to attain the overconsumptive living standards of developed nations, environmental and sustainability issues are inevitably marginalized by short-term interests. Navjot’s work focused keenly on such conflicts, and he was an outspoken advocate for a more-equitable world.

Navjot was unquestionably passionate in his defense of nature. Notoriously salty in his language, he had little patience for those he regarded as antagonists of conservation. In one infamous episode before an audience of 500 Australian colleagues, Navjot blasted a prominent scientist—one who had disputed the magnitude of the tropical extinction crisis—and bluntly instructed him to perform a rude physical act that is technically impossible. The scientist in question was mortified, but the audience loved it. When suitably agitated, Navjot could roar like a lion when championing the environment.

Despite (or perhaps because of) his mischievous mannerisms, Navjot Sodhi was an engaging teacher and supervisor, respected and even beloved by his students. His lectures on biodiversity conservation generated great pas-

sion among his students. He was recognized many times for his teaching prowess, awarded a Certificate of Distinction in Teaching from Harvard University in 2009 during his Hrdy Fellowship, and received other academic distinctions throughout his career. Yet he was not the type of supervisor to coddle his graduate students. His was a sink-or-swim, publish-or-perish approach, which produced many of the best and brightest minds in conservation biology. Navjot’s extended academic phenotype now spans much of the planet.

Born in 1962 in the city of Nabha in the Patiala District of the state of Punjab, India, Navjot completed his first two university degrees (BS and MS) in zoology at Panjab University in Chandigarh. Via family and professional ties, he then traveled to Canada, where he completed his Ph.D. in 1991 on the foraging ecology of urban-breeding Merlins (*Falco columbarius*) at the University of Saskatchewan. Navjot then took up a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, examining the impact of forest fragmentation on wood warblers. He next moved to Japan for a year to work on various applied and theoretical aspects of ornithology at the Laboratory of Wildlife Conservation at the National Institute for Environmental Studies and the University of Kyoto. But it was his transformative move to Singapore in the mid-1990s, where he took up a tenure-track position at the National University of Singapore, that cemented his career in tropical conservation science. In just a decade he was promoted to full professor. Prior to falling ill, Navjot had accepted a new professorial chair at the University of Toronto, Canada, where he planned to continue his efforts to highlight the tropical biodiversity crisis from afar and to expand his scope into temperate regions, particularly in Canada’s globally important boreal forests. He never made it.

The outpouring of grief, condolences, and tributes that have followed Navjot Sodhi’s death attest to his immense popularity, his unfailing generosity to colleagues, and the respect he commanded within and beyond his profession. It is no exaggeration to say that biodiversity conservation is diminished by his untimely death. Navjot’s legacy is preserved in his abundant writings, the minds and hearts of the people with whom he was acquainted, and the skills and experiences of those he trained. As some of his closest collaborators, we profoundly regret his passing and lament the loss of a true friend, an exceptional mind, and an inspiring warrior for nature conservation. To ensure his legacy endures, we have worked with the Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation to establish the Navjot Sodhi Award in Tropical Conservation Science in his honor. This annual award will benefit young leaders in developing nations who advance conservation science—a most fitting tribute to his career. To contribute to this memorial award, please contact the Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation (www.tropicalbio.org). Navjot Sodhi is survived

by his wife Charanjit (affectionately called 'Bubblie' by Navjot) and two adult children, Ada and Darwin. He will be sorely missed.

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