

Fourth World Congress of Herpetology: 3–9 December 2001, Bentota, Sri Lanka

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The World Congress of Herpetology held its fourth meeting in December 2001 at the five-star Taj Exotica Hotel Resort at Bentota on the southwestern coast of Sri Lanka. Despite almost insurmountable national and international events that affected scheduling and disrupted travel plans (the Tamil Tiger terrorist attack on Sri Lanka's international airport last summer, the events of September 11 in the United States, and the dissolution of Sri Lanka's parliament and scheduling of national elections on December 5), the Congress convened on schedule in an idyllic tropical beach setting. Approximately 208 delegates from 34 countries (Table 1) attended six days of meetings, followed by a day of field trips to the nearby wetland preserves of Muthurajawela or Madhuganga.



First day cover of four endemic amphibian stamps issued (3 December 2001) to commemorate the Fourth World Congress of Herpetology. Featured are *Philautus femoralis*, *Rana gracilis*, *Thelederma schmarida*, and *Polypedates longinasus*.

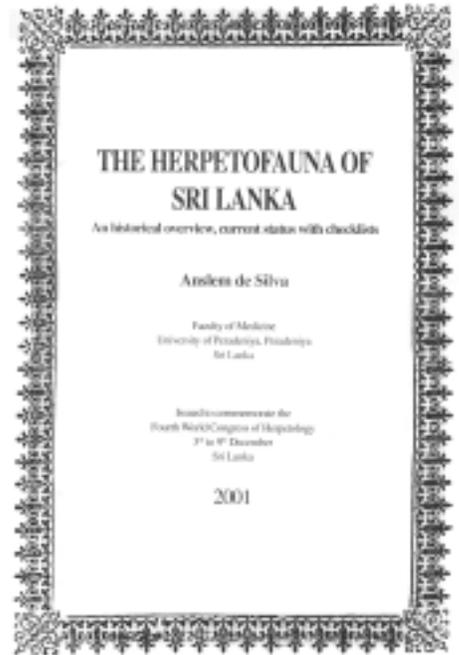
After the Congress, delegates departed for cultural sites and national parks and preserves around the country. Attendees probably wished for more time to see Sri Lanka's biotic diversity and to enjoy the friendliness of its people.

The purpose of the World Congress of Herpetology (WCH) is to bring together scientists and others, from all parts of the world, interested in the biology of amphibians and reptiles so that ideas and techniques may be ex-

changed and collaboration fostered. Previous Congresses were held in Canterbury (United Kingdom) in 1989, Adelaide (Australia) in 1993/4, and Prague (Czech Republic) in 1997. As highlights of the Congresses, internationally recognized scientists present plenary lectures featuring state-of-the-art knowledge, both as a retrospective of a distinguished career and as a stimulus for further thought and research. Past Congresses have emphasized plenary speakers and specially organized sessions, with contributed talks and posters given by other researchers as time and space permitted. At the Fourth World Congress, a similar protocol was followed but, due to last-minute changes in travel plans, several sessions and a number of talks had to be canceled. Most papers fell into the contributed category, but only after approval by the WCH Scientific Programme Committee. No more than two concurrent sessions were ongoing during any part of the Congress. Fortunately, the plenary lectures were excellent, and the reduced number of delegates allowed for much discussion and inter-personal interaction.

The Congress opened on the morning of 3 December with a procession featuring Sri Lankan dancers in traditional costumes playing drums, brass rams' horns, and finger cymbals. The procession was followed by the lighting of a ceremonial oil lamp by Congress organizers, visiting dignitaries (including Mrs. Shiranee Yasaratne, IUCN Country Representative for Sri Lanka), and representatives of the Executive Committee (EC). A special 4WCH first day cover and a set of postage stamps featuring four endemic Sri Lanka amphibians were issued, and a presentation was made of a special book on the herpetofauna of Sri Lanka from its author, Anselm de Silva, to Michael Tyler, Secretary General of the WCH. After brief introductions by members of the local committee and Michael Tyler, the Congress began with its first plenary lecture.

There were five plenary lectures: Anita Malhotra (Evolution of Asian vipers); Yehuda Werner (Foraging behavior in gekkonomorph lizards); Wolfgang Wüster (Pit vipers and South



A new book covering the herpetofauna of Sri Lanka, authored by Conference Director Anselm de Silva, was issued to coincide with the meeting.



Conference director Anselm de Silva chatting with Frankie Bossuyt.

Special sessions were held on the frog fauna of south Asia, habitat fragmentation and the conservation of herpetofauna, behavioral and morphological asymmetries, social aggregation in lizards, molecular ecology and evolution in lizards, and applied herpetology. Of special note is the launching of a new journal, *Applied Herpetology*, which will focus on applied or practical research involving amphibians and reptiles, such as methods to reduce the impacts of habitat fragmentation and mitigate threats to herpetofauna, veterinary or medical applications of herpetology, forensic herpetology, and new research and sampling techniques. Interested contributors or subscribers should contact Michael Lambert at the Natural Resources Unit of the University of Greenwich (m.r.k.Lambert@gre.ac.uk).

As might be expected from a Congress held in south Asia, many talks focused on the herpetofaunal diversity of southeast Asia, southern India (especially the eastern and western Ghats), and Sri Lanka. Many New World herpetologists are aware of Neotropical anuran diversity, especially within the genus *Eleutherodactylus*, but few may have been as aware of the high diversity of anurans in south India and Sri Lanka (see Dubois 1999). For example, 100 or more species within the family Rhacophoridae are estimated to be present on Sri Lanka alone, especially in the genus *Philautus* (or *Pseudophilautus*) (e.g., Bossuyt and Dubois 2001). Indeed, Sri Lanka may eventually be found to be inhabited by as many as 250 amphibian species (Das 2001). Other than a regional focus, no one discipline seemed more represented than others. Conservation themes were quite evident, although fortunately the amphibian faunas of south and southeast Asia do not appear to be undergoing the serious population declines that have affected amphibians in Australia, Central America, and elsewhere.

The business meeting of the Fourth World Congress was held on 5 December, but it was much more casual, even disorganized (disheveled?), than previous WCH business meetings. The financial arrangements in support of the Sri Lanka local committee (loans; travel by EC members) seem to have seriously challenged the WCH bank account, although organizers hope that the repayment of loans and proceeds from the Congress will eventually balance the books. Nominations for the International Herpetological and Executive committees were read but, because so few Executive Committee members were present, voting on the new candidates will take place at a later time. No venue or date was agreed upon for the Fifth World Congress of Herpetology, although Bra-

zil, Singapore, and Japan were mentioned. The outgoing Secretary General, whose term ends in March 2002, stated that North Americans seemed not to have a serious interest in hosting a future Congress because of the number and size of existing herpetological meetings there; he would be delighted if a Central or South American organization made a formal proposal for the next Congress. The next WCH should take place in 2005 or sooner. There were no resolutions, and no new business was undertaken.

Social activities were more limited than at previous Congresses, due in part perhaps to the general curfew in effect during the elections. Even the sale of alcohol was banned during the elections, of perhaps modest concern to many herpetologists (known, as they are, for their consumption of grains and grapes during meeting socials). Evening films by Mark O'Shea and Rom Whitaker were shown, but most evenings were free for discussion, moonlit walks on the beach, or hunting frogs around a small pond on the hotel grounds. Day excursions were made by many delegates to Galapata Vihara, a 12th Century Buddhist temple, local sea turtle hatcheries, the spice gardens in a nearby village, and various diving and snorkeling locations. On 8 December, a buffet banquet was held on the lawn overlooking the Indian Ocean; a group of Sri Lankan traditional dancers entertained participants by performing acrobatic and story-telling dances accompanied by Sri Lankan music. A long auction followed.

TABLE 1. The number of delegates, by country, attending the Fourth World Congress of Herpetology, Bentota, Sri Lanka, 3–9 December 2001.

Austria	4
Australia	20
Belgium	1
Brazil	3
Canada	3
Czech Republic	2
Egypt	2
Finland	1
France	6
Germany	8
Hungary	4
India	13
Iran	2
Israel	7
Italy	2
Japan	16
Lebanon	2
Malawi	1
Malaysia	2
Netherlands	6
New Zealand	3
Poland	1
China (incl. Taiwan)	3
Russia	3
Singapore	2
South Africa	4
Spain	2
Sri Lanka	24
Sweden	7
Switzerland	1
U.A.E.	2
U.K.	29
U.S.A.	21
Venezuela	1

Six publications were issued just prior to or in conjunction with the Fourth World Congress, in addition to a hard cover 143 page book featuring 182 abstracts:

- BAMBARADENIYA, C. N. B., AND V. N. SAMARASEKARA (EDS.). 2001. An Overview of the Threatened Herpetofauna of South Asia. IUCN Sri Lanka and Asia Regional Biodiversity Programme. Colombo, Sri Lanka. vi + 118 pp.
- DE SILVA, A. 2001. The Herpetofauna of Sri Lanka. An historical overview, current status with checklists. Amphibia and Reptile Research Organization of Sri Lanka (ARROS). Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. 91 pp.
- _____. (ED.). 2001. The Amphibia of Sri Lanka: Recent Research. *Lyriocephalus* (Special Issue) 4(1–2):1–173.
- FERGUSON, W. 1877 (2001). Reptile Fauna of Ceylon. Facsimile Reprint. Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles. Ithaca, New York. v + 42 pp.
- RATHNAYAKE, N. D. 2001. An account of monitor lizards in Sri Lanka: status and distribution. Occasional Papers of the Amphibia and Reptile Research Organization of Sri Lanka. (1):1–10.
- SOMAWEEA, R., K. UKUWELA, AND S. KARUNARATNE. 2001. Menikdena: a local herpetofauna hotspot. Occasional Papers of the Amphibia and Reptile Research Organization of Sri Lanka. (2):1–8.

In addition, three full color posters (Amphibians, Snakes, Reptiles) of Sri Lankan herpetofauna were available.

Despite incredible distractions which occurred at the most inopportune times, the local committee of the Fourth World Congress of Herpetology deserves high praise for organizing and carrying on with an enjoyable and instructive scientific program. I doubt most of us would have been able to rearrange the venue (from Colombo to Bentota) and program so completely, at a moment's notice, as did Anslem de Silva and his associates. One can only hope that the next World Congress will face fewer difficulties and be better attended. Herpetologists who did not come to Sri Lanka missed a memorable meeting, and a beautiful country and people.

LITERATURE CITED

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