

Dr. Patrick W. Colgan (1944-2004)
Director Emeritus of Research and Natural Lands at Royal Botanical Gardens



Dr. Patrick Colgan (right) and Dr. Peter Wyse Jackson (left), Secretary General of Botanic Gardens Conservation International, touring Ontario's Royal Botanical Gardens in November of 2001. Photo by D. Galbraith.

Dr. Patrick W. Colgan, Director Emeritus of Research and Natural Lands at Ontario's Royal Botanical Gardens, passed away on 21 July 2004 at his home in Burlington, Ontario, at the age of 59 from the effects of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). He served for four years as a member of the senior staff of RBG and had a profound effect on the role of science in botanical gardens in Canada.

Patrick studied experimental psychology at the University of Toronto and Harvard University, earning his Ph.D. at Cornell University in 1971 at age 26. He then joined the biology faculty of Queen's University in Kingston, serving as Associate Head of biology from 1988-1990 and Chair of Life Sciences in the School of Graduate Studies and Research from 1985-1987.

At Queen's Patrick supervised 19 master's degree students, 7 doctoral dissertations and 5 post-doctoral fellows, and served on the supervisory committees of numerous graduate students, including the doctoral committee of the author. His professional written output was large, including authoring two landmark books: in 1983 Comparative Social Recognition (John Wiley & Sons, New York) and in 1989 Animal Motivation (Kluwer Academic Publishers Group, London). He edited two volumes on quantitative methods in the study of behaviour. With colleagues he published over 80 refereed papers in animal behaviour, primarily on behaviour and environmental biology of fish. He also contributed to methodology and theory.

In 1991 Patrick was appointed Assistant Director for Collections and Research at the Canadian Museum of Nature, Ottawa. His work at the museum came at a turbulent time, when the role of research and museum-based researchers was in flux. Eventually taking early retirement in 1997 Patrick by then was Vice President for Science and Education. Upon leaving CMN Patrick donated his extensive personal library to various institutions. Algoma College received 11,000 volumes, and many others went to the University of Northern British Columbia. He donated his extensive scientific reprint collection comprising over 300,000 articles to Memorial University of Newfoundland.

He served as the President of the Animal Behaviour Society in 1989 and 1990, as editor of the journal Animal Behaviour from 1982 to 1985, and as editor of the newsletter for the International Council of Museums, Natural History in 1995 and 1996. While at the Canadian Museum of Nature he instituted and led a Task Force on Canadian Biosystemics, authoring a major report on the state of systematics research and capacity in Canada in 1992. Systematics is the science of deducing natural relationships among species and thus is the foundation for all work in biodiversity.

In 1997 Patrick and his partner Marcia Sweet moved to Niagara-On-The-Lake, Ontario. Patrick continued to pursue his interests in higher education as a sessional professor in evolutionary biology at Brock University in near-by St. Catharines. During this time he also continued work on a major personal project, the development of a biographical database of science with 40,000 entries gleaned from the fruits of his voracious reading appetite. Patrick was proud to be a board member of the Niagara-on-the-Lake Public Library, the oldest public library in Canada, during a time of controversy and turbulence about building and moving to a new facility.

Patrick joined the staff of Royal Botanical Gardens in Hamilton and Burlington, Ontario in the fall of 2000 as Director of Research and Natural Lands. He continued this work until illness forced him to take medical leave in late 2003. He supervised the RBG herbarium, library, research and natural lands projects, researchers and ecological managers. He was responsible for the stewardship of approximately 1,000 hectares of natural lands owned and managed by RBG and represented the institution in collaborations such as the Bay Area Restoration Council.

Patrick was very interested in the role of botanical gardens and all public institutions in promoting science and education for the public good. Although he was at RBG less than four years, Patrick's work was critical to the institution and his leadership and intellectual profile were welcomed by staff. In an obituary column published on 27 July 2004 in the Hamilton Spectator newspaper Marcia Sweet is quoted as saying "RBG and Patrick were a natural fit" and "It was a really good match and he found his academic home here."

At RBG Patrick developed a thematic framework for all of the activities of his department in support of RBG's mission and mandate, created a system for academics to be affiliated with RBG as Research Associates and also a research permit system to facilitate extramural use of RBG's assets. He developed closer ties between RBG and near-by McMaster University and took leadership of the RBG team participating in "Green Legacy," a unique collaboration between RBG and the Canadian Museum of Nature for a traveling museum exhibit on endangered plants and the importance of plant diversity. He supported and developed RBG's geographic information systems (GIS) program and oversaw integration of GIS into management of RBG's nature sanctuaries. In 2002 and 2003 Patrick also served as RBG's Acting Director of Horticulture.

In 2001 Patrick explored a new relationship between RBG and indigenous peoples which resulted in a First Nations internship program in ethnobotany at RBG, supported by the Museum Assistance Program of the Government of Canada. This program is training Pat Hess, an experienced specialist in traditional medicines and a Cayuga from Six Nations, in the "western" approach to botanical study and identification of plants. She is using this process to develop a common lexicon of medicinal plants in her community, create a local herbarium and protect and transmit the local indigenous knowledge within the community. This program led to his service on the President's Council on Indigenous Studies of McMaster University from 2002 until his death. This initiative also inspired a breakthrough workshop on relationships between indigenous cultures and botanical gardens at the 2002 AABGA annual conference in Hamilton.

Shortly after joining RBG Patrick championed the case for the institution to formally adopt the International Agenda for Botanic Gardens in Conservation, published by Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI) in 2000, as a framework for the institution's conservation activities. Following months of consultation and preparatory work the Board of Directors of RBG endorsed the International Agenda in later 2001, the first such recognition for this important document by any institution in Canada and just 7th world-wide.

Patrick participated in several important meetings linking botanical gardens across Canada in partnership with agencies like Environment Canada. He helped to further the development of both CBCN and the Canadian Botanical Gardens Consortium for Biodiversity, With the author Patrick oversaw the development in 2002 of "Investing in Nature: A Partnership for Plants in Canada," supported by BGCI and HSBC plc, a global financial services corporation.

Dr. Colgan remained interested in RBG and as active as possible following the onset of his medical leave in late 2003. With the title Director Emeritus of Research and Natural Lands he continued to attend weekly meetings well into 2004 and to provide very helpful guidance to staff.

A deep intellect and a man of humour and honour, Patrick was a devout humanist and devotee of philosopher Bertrand Russell, serving on the Board of the Bertrand Russell Archives at McMaster University. He had a profound love of music and sang as an oratorio chorister (baritone) for over 50 years, including with major choral societies in Kingston and Niagara.

Patrick Colgan is sadly missed by all who knew him as a friend and colleague.

Contributed by David Galbraith with thanks to Marcia, colleagues and friends for contributions and corrections

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