Laudatio for Valério Pillar. Recipient IAVS Honorary Membership Award in 2020

by Alicia T.R. Acosta

I’m very honoured to introduce Valério De Patta Pillar as the 2020 recipient of the IAVS Honorary Membership award. As most of you know, this is the highest award the International Vegetation Science Association can confer on an individual member for recognizing sustained contributions of extraordinary merit to the Association or to the field of Vegetation Science. Valério is a worthy recipient on both counts. Since this award was created in 1988, 17 people have received the title of Honorary Member but this is the first time it has been awarded to someone from South America.

Today, I will try highlight some of his achievements, although I’m unlikely to do them justice.

Contributions to Vegetation Science

Valério De Patta Pillar holds a degree in Agronomy from the Federal University of Santa Maria (Brazil), a master’s degree in Animal Science (Forage Plants) from UFRGS (Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil) and a PhD in Plant Sciences (Quantitative Ecology) from University of Western Ontario (Canada) supervised by László Orlóci. Then he has come back to Porto Alegre, his home, where...
In the Cordoba Mts, Argentina

Group photo from the fieldwork in Aceguá, Uruguay, 2018
he is still professor in the Department of Ecology at the Biosciences Institute at UFRGS.

In the international community Valério is well-known for his scientific contributions to analytical methods and plant traits research, but it should also be highlighted that he has a deep concern for the conservation and management of grasslands in southern Brazil.

**Analytical methods and plant traits**

Valério devoted most of his career to expanding the analytical tools used in vegetation ecology. Internationally, he has been a pioneer in trait-based quantitative ecology. His PhD thesis, defended in 1992, was entitled “The Theory of Character-Based Community Analysis” which was a pioneer study on functional traits and gave rise to the computer program SYNCSA. Over time this program has become very popular and now is available as an R package, providing functions to analyze trait and phylogenetic patterns involved in community assembly.

Since his PhD, Valério has been highly involved in research on multivariate and randomization analyses and their applications in ecology, especially community ecology. His studies on multivariate analyses (hierarchical clustering, ordination, hypothesis tests), particularly those associated with Monte Carlo tests and bootstrapping, are unparalleled. He developed some important analytical procedures, such as a distance-based analysis of variance which he published in JVS with László Orlóci in 1996. This method is implemented in Valério’s program MULTIV (C++), together with other multivariate and randomization procedures. Ten years later, other authors published their own version of this randomization method that also became very popular. Valério continues to be recognized as a great authority in quantitative analysis worldwide.

Over the last years Valério has been focusing on experiments to understand the effects of climatic changes on grassland communities. Furthermore, he is analysing how different fire and cattle management regimes affect grassland communities in terms of composition, diversity and stability.

Otto Wildi said “Valério always has unexpected ideas and he knows how to implement them mathematically. He is an artist in handling linear algebra, with which he knows how to express the most challenging ideas in ecology.”

**Conservation and management of grasslands in southern Brazil**

Another important contribution of Valério’s to vegetation science is related to conservation biology. His authentic passion for grasslands has been apparent since the beginning of his career: in 1996 he published one of the first papers on grassland vegetation ecology in southern Brazil. Later, he supervised many PhD students and led many research projects focusing on understanding grassland biodiversity, grassland dynamics, including grassland-forest dynamics, and grassland conservation. In 2006 he organized a regional workshop on the status of southern Brazilian grasslands, resulting in a book that has been heavily used. In fact, from 2000 on and starting with several PhD students working on grassland, Valério set the seed for a large group on grassland ecology working in southern Brazil. Here he led large research projects that always included the “transfer of knowledge” to society. Over the last decade, Valério has been particularly interested in promoting the conservation of grasslands, with emphasis on the Pampa. In 2015 he edited a beautiful book addressed to a more general readership, ‘O Campos do Sul’, aiming at raising the awareness of the conservation value of these grasslands.

Being a young boy Valério travelled with his father through the Brazilian Pampa countryside experiencing the life of a typical cattle drove. This was in the 70’ and for 8 days he “helped” to move a cattle herd through a very important grassland region in Rio Grande do Sul, still well-conserved at that time. It seems he fell in love with the grasslands then. And, as one of his students said, “Valério’s love for the Pampa goes much further than the simply rational understanding of the overwhelming biodiversity found there: the Pampa’s conservation is probably one of his main purposes in life.

**Services to IAVS and the Scientific Community**

Valério has actively participated in the IAVS since he was a PhD student in 1991. From 2004 he was part of the JVS editorial board and became a Chief Editor from 2013. In 2002 he organized the 45th IAVS Symposium in Porto Alegre with an unforgettable excursion in Southernmost Brazil. Within the IAVS, Valério has always intensively promoted collaboration between Brazilian plant ecologists and researchers from other countries and now many Brazilian plant ecologists are regular IAVS members. Moreover, in recent decades there has been a considerable increase in the quantity and quality of scientific articles in the field of ecology by researchers linked to Brazilian Institutions. Just to have an idea of this contribution, authors affiliated with Brazilian institutions published a number of articles in the IAVS journals only slightly lower than those affiliated to institutions in countries such as Germany, the United States or China. One of the JVS/AVS Chief Editors said, “he is an excellent partner, always very reliable, competent and fast. He always spends a lot of time reading the manuscripts submitted to our journals to make the best judgement.”

“Valério’s work for IAVS seems to speak by itself. No doubt that he dedicated a large part of his time to the Association which it is very important to him”, one of his collaborators highlighted.
Furthermore, in 2005 Valério was one of the founders of the Brazilian Ecological Society, ABECO and he also served as President between 2016-2019. As President, Valério intensively promoted the Brazilian research network in ecology. He was also one of the founders of ABECO’s journal “Perspectives in Ecology and Conservation”

The Plant Ecology lab at UFRGS

Valério has always been intensively involved in university life: he served as vice-director of the Biosciences Institute at the University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) and was also involved in the Association of Professors and the University Council.

Valério’s lab at the Department of Ecology of the UFRGS is a place full of computers and people, with many postdoc/graduate/undergraduate students. They say that more than a research space this lab is collaboration space where everybody learns from each other. His students highlight that he was never fond of hierarchies. They never felt he was a boss.

The research expeditions he organized were simply unforgettable to all who participated.

Many generations of Masters and PhD students succeeded in Valérios’ lab (he supervised more the 20 PhDs) and many of them still work together. His students recognize that he is a great source of inspiration and a model for younger researchers.

Valério has been a top researcher in the main Brazilian funding agency, which enabled him to obtain important funds even during the economic and political crisis. His students highlight that these funds allowed the group not...
only to continue with their research projects but also to maintain international collaborations, in particular the participation in IAVS symposia.

Today, many of his former students work in different places, in different universities or research institutions, however, they demonstrate the same collaborative style of research in their own research activities. “Valério could be called the father of Brazilian grassland ecology”, one of them emphasized very proudly.

Not only scientific work

Valério is also very much interested in social justice and democracy. He is very concerned about equality and diversity in our society. He has a clear idea about the role researchers play and about what teaching and commitments in a public university should be. He always sought a more fair and equal society in Brazil.

And for those that don’t know him, I would say that Valério is a sympathetic person. He is passionate but tolerant. He is generous, kind and respectful with everyone. And he has the strength to get up even after a great loss.

Conclusions

Valério is a worthy recipient IAVS Honorary Membership award either for his sustained contributions to the field of Vegetation Science than to the Association. Valério has contributed to the advancement in different research directions: (1) vegetation ecology; (2) functional ecology; (3) quantitative methods in ecology; (4) grassland ecology and conservation. Hopefully, the new generations of Brazilian plant ecologist will continue the endeavours he initiated.

Valério is not only part of Brazil, he is genuine representative of Brazilian culture, and I am tempted to say the” South American culture”. His unique personal features were highlighted by all the people I’ve contacted.

Finally, I would like to conclude with Otto Wildi’s words regarding Valério’s role in the IAVS, using a metaphor evoking the gauchos of the Brazilian Campos: “He is with certainly one of the best cowboys in the organization, no one could even dream of riding a horse as virtuously as he does. No, no one”.

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