



Robert "Bob" Behnke

December 30, 1929 - September 13, 2013

Robert "Bob" Behnke, 83, of Fort Collins passed away peacefully at his home with his wife by his side on Friday September 13th. He was born on December 30, 1929 in Stamford, CT. He lived in Connecticut until he was drafted into the army to serve in the Korean War. He then returned to the University of Connecticut and received his undergraduate degree. Afterwards, he went to the University of California Berkeley where he received his Masters and PhD in Ichthyology. In 1963, he met and married Sally Martin. He moved his family to Colorado in 1966 for a job with the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife. He became a professor with Colorado State University in the 1970's where he cemented his role as a leading authority and advocate for trout and salmon worldwide. His conservation efforts even led to having a trout named in his honor. He was the author of "Native Trout of Western North America," "Trout and Salmon in North America" and "About Trout" as well as writing a column in Trout Magazine dubbing him "Dr. Trout." As a devoted husband and father, he is survived by Sally, his wife of almost 50 years; daughter, Cynthia Hanson, her husband, Paul and their children, Isabella and Zachary; and his son, Robert Behnke II, his wife, Jenny and their children, Bryson and Caroline. Other survivors include his brother, Albert Behnke and sister, Olive "Sis" Abbott and their extended families. A service will be held at St. Luke's Episcopal Church 2000 Stover Street, Fort Collins on Saturday, September 21st at 11:00 am.

Bob's wish was to fund future scientists so in lieu of flowers if friends would like to make a memorial contribution they may do so to:

Robert J. Behnke Rocky Mountain Flycaster Research Fellowship
Department of Fish and Wildlife and Conservation Biology at CSU Foundation
PO Box 1870
Fort Collins, CO 80522

Tribute Wall



“ Robert "Bob" Behnke

October 25, 2022 at 06:14 PM



“ I remember a letter my mother received from Robert Behnke when he was researching my Grandfather Livingston Stone many many years ago, and more recently meeting him at a reception connected with the a book which I contributed to "An Entirely Synthetic Fish." I learned much about my grandfather that I never knew as my father Edmund Cushing Stone, though he had memories of his childhood at the hatchery in the McCloud River did not realize the significance of his contribution, or perhaps I was too young to understand. (He died when I was 22.) I was so honored to meet him!.

I'm also interested to know whether the young woman who was a participant in the Wood's Hole Polaris Project (last name Behnke) 2015 was related, as Livingston's great great granddaughter participated this year.

Rebecca McCue - July 19, 2017 at 02:59 PM

DM

“ Sally, family and many shared friends,
I was very sad to hear of Bob's passing. Our friendship goes back some 50 years to our shared experiences and many grad. student parties at Berserkely in the 1960s. We have stayed in touch all these years, including several visits to his home and personal trout stream when I was driving to the West Coast from Tallahassee to teach in the summer at various marine laboratories up and down the Pacific Coast. When I didn't get a card and personal note this holiday season, I assumed the worst because Bob was a very faithful correspondent and always had something interesting and relevant to relate. The scientific world has lost one of its outstanding practitioners and all-around great field biologists. It was a genuine privilege to have known him all these years and to have shared not only some of his famous home-brewed beer, but also his many tales and adventures as only Bob could relate them!

Rest easy, Bob and thanks for all the good times, for your prodigious ichthyological achievements, and for the many great memories!

Dick Mariscal

Tallahassee, Florida

Dick Mariscal - January 31, 2014 at 01:49 PM



“ Our cherub-faced Wizard of Trouts seemed to affect many of his students similarly. Way back in 1978, I had an interest in the biological relationships between riparian forests and trout habitat and populations. While Cummings and others had detailed the importance of riparian litter fall (allochthonous energy inputs), I was interested in physical effects, such as benthic expansion. It was emerging science and no matter how cleverly I used the Readers Guides (it was 78, the internet was a decade away), I couldn't find much literature. I turned to Dr. Behnke. Going to visit him at the scheduled time was a trip. His office was behind a large apothecary of preserved piscatorial specimens, but I will always see them with a tinge of eye-of-newt, befitting the alchemist puffing away at his pipe behind those inscrutable piles of paper. Sure enough, when I explained my dilemma, he said that the BLM had been doing research on just that subject, quickly dug through a one pile of his paper barricade, and voila, found the grey paper that quickly led to what I needed. He was a Wizard.

I met him several times afterward, but none of those experiences surpassed my first encounter with the Wizard of Trouts. A terrific man and a wonderful teacher, I am privileged to have met him. Fish with God, Dr. Bob.

Rich Domingue - January 05, 2014 at 08:55 PM

RC

“ *THANK YOU...BOB!!! For all U R, have been and ALWAYS will B! In the back of my mind when things get tough, U remind me PASSION is the next step to SUCCESS!*

Was looking for your number to call U, saddened for for family & friends to find this but Happy to have known U as an Awesome human and we'll talk SPIRITUALLY, Trout Talk of Course!

Best Wishes to all Family & Friends, didn't know Bob well but enough to feel what he carried in his Big Heart...my thoughts R with U, U were Blessed...

RJ Cain, Bozeman, Montana



RJ Cain - October 03, 2013 at 12:34 PM

SD

“ *Sally,
Our thoughts have been with you, your family and friends. May each day bring all of you a little more peace.....Sharri Delehoy & Patrick Callahan*

Sharri Delehoy - September 20, 2013 at 08:56 PM

JB

“ 3 files added to the album e-mailed pictures



Jenny Behnke - September 20, 2013 at 07:22 PM

JB

“ 3 files added to the album New Album Name



Jenny Behnke - September 20, 2013 at 07:21 PM

JB

“ 3 files added to the album New Album Name



Jenny Behnke - September 20, 2013 at 07:19 PM

PH

“ As Dr. Robert Behnke's son-in-law; I was very fortunate to be welcomed into the Behnke family fold when I married his daughter Cynthia. What was constantly inspiring about Bob was his passion for life and his amazing photographic memory. Whether it was talking about clamming in the SF Bay Area, interesting facets of collegiate life in Berkeley in the early 60s, tasty and unique recipes for gourmet food, personal history about my own grandfather that Bob would recall during family conversation (such as how to be a capitalist and socialist at the same time -there was always a spirited, inspired passion for detail. This was not just some academic zealot-this was a man who lived big, enjoyed his world and spent his time knowing as much as he could about it. When I first found out what Mr. Behnke did for a living-I wasn't particularly familiar with fish and fish science. I came to realize not just how fascinating and beautiful the world of fresh-water fish was but how important it was to our natural world. And that passion Bob held was a constant. It was not just for fish but for food, nature, science, family and life.

Paul Hanson - September 20, 2013 at 06:57 PM

SF

“ Sally:
Bob and I started at CSU about the same time - he as Assistant Leader of the Fishery Coop Unit and me as a PhD student. He not only was a great help to me as a beginning PHD but also was a source of information throughout my career as a faculty member. I remember he helped me with my first publication. The editor replied that it was so well written than no revision was needed. That never happened again! Though Bob was an ichthyologist, I could discuss fish culture as intellectually with him as with my graduate students. Bob was "one of a kind" and I was privileged to have been associated with him.
Steve Flickinger

Steve Flickinger - September 20, 2013 at 09:58 AM

LD

“ *Mrs. Behnke and family,
I wish you peace at this difficult time. I was privileged to have Dr. Behnke on my thesis committee. When I went to meet him, I thought I had been sent to a store room. The paper filled room turned out to be Dr. Behnke's office and a treasure trove of material. Dr. Behnke turned out to be the greatest treasure of all. He always had a paper, book or thought that helped make your work better. He was brilliant but always willing to share his knowledge and wisdom. Thank you for sharing Dr. Behnke with all of us.*
Linda R. Drees

Linda R. Drees - September 19, 2013 at 02:26 PM

DS

“ *My sincerest condolences to Dr. Behnke's wife, Sally, and family.*

I was never very close to Doc Behnke, but as a former student and since then as a friend and associate in the same department, I have great respect for him and his work. I remember well his office of semi-organized chaos with boxes and piles of literature and jars of specimens everywhere. But whenever I or someone else needed a paper, reference, or data, he usually knew exactly where to find it.

We will miss Doc, but I can picture him now casting away in fisherman's heaven.

*Darrel Snyder,
Larval Fish Laboratory*

Darrel Snyder - September 18, 2013 at 01:48 PM

JP

“ *My thoughts are with you all. Bob was the most important mentor for me and a whole generation of students. He touched the lives of so many people, and left a lasting legacy in his profession.*

John Piccolo

John Piccolo - September 18, 2013 at 03:40 AM

PT

“ *I was deeply saddened to learn that Bob Behnke has passed away. I know he influenced many as a scholar, educator, and friend...including me. When my own career took a turn from the chemical sciences and molecular biology into environmental forestry and finally fisheries, he was among the first to offer his encouragement. Always generous in sharing his deep knowledge and understanding of our native western trouts, he became my first and foremost mentor. Our conclaves certainly won't be the same without him there to liven up the discussions!*

*Patrick Trotter
Seattle, WA*

Patrick Trotter - September 17, 2013 at 09:02 PM

BH

“ Unfortunately, I never got to know Bob very well. We shared a few emails about some controversies about science he was involved in a few years ago. I gave him a few books to read, and he let me read a few of his papers on the controversies he was involved in. (Sally has to be thanked for that)

But I know Sally, through Ft Collins Water Aerobics, and cost-hosts of a birthday party or two. To Sally and her family I send my deepest sympathy. I hope the 50 years you had together, Sally and family, will help you a little through this dark time

Bob Hollinger

bob hollinger - September 17, 2013 at 06:33 PM

PT

“ I was deeply saddened to learn of Bob Behnke's passing. I know he influenced many as a scholar, educator, and friend...me included.

When my own career took a turn away from the chemical sciences and molecular biology into environmental forestry and finally fisheries, he was among the first to offer his encouragement.

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Patrick Trotter

Seattle, WA

Patrick Trotter - September 17, 2013 at 06:21 PM

SP

“ There are very few people whose personalities and accomplishments are so monumental and unique that one need not invoke the individual’s full name when speaking to colleagues of their legendary friend. Dr. Robert J. Behnke, the bigger than life man respected throughout the academic community for his work on trout, was one such person. But to those us privileged enough to have basked in the ambiance of this remarkable scientist, teacher, mentor, and raconteur, he was universally identified by the single moniker: “Doc”.

I will miss “Doc”- my friend, advisor, teacher, and driving partner (in 1982 the two of us took a road trip in Sally’s brand-new Volkswagen Jetta driving from CSU to an ASIH meeting in Tallahassee; as you can imagine, given Doc’s culinary peculiarities and propensity for dropping his lite pipe – the Jetta was no longer new [seven days and 3,500 miles later] when we returned to Fort Collins). I am fortunate to have vivid memories of the time I spent with Doc in his Advanced Ichthyology Class (renamed by his students “An hour with Doc”), talking with him about fish ecology and systematics while in his disheveled office in the basement of Wagar and listening to Doc at social gatherings while his reminiscing effortlessly segued between his graduate school antics at UC Berkley to his adventures in Iran. Those events “were a real treat” and are treasured memories.

*To Sally, Cynthia, Rob and the rest of Doc’s family, I am very sorry for your loss and know words are of little comfort at this time. Please know that Doc was one of the most humble, gentle, and genuine people that I have ever known and I feel honored and privileged to have had the opportunity to call this incredible man my friend.
Goodbye Doc.*

Steven Platania - September 17, 2013 at 06:11 PM

ST

“ We have lost one of the great conservationist and the leading proponent of wild trout. I met Bob in 1968 when I joined the cooperative unit at Colorado State University as a graduate student. Bob was one of my advisers and instilled in me the love of wild salmonids and the environs where they live. He became a mentor and have remained friends since graduation in 1969 and a career as a research biologist that spanned the next 30 years. He will be missed; the world has lost a voice for wild trout. Rest in peace Bob. You changed the world,one student at a time.

Spencer E. Turner - September 17, 2013 at 02:33 PM

PK

“ I am so sorry to hear about Bob's passing. He was a very important mentor to me when I began teaching in F&W at CSU in 1991. I was fresh out of graduate school and part of my duties involved teaching the junior-level management class to fish and wildlife majors. I was comfortable with the wildlife material but what did I know about wiggly ectotherms?? I badly needed a crash course in fish biology and management. So during my first few years at CSU I would regularly travel to (and through!) Bob's office for the oral "Cliff Notes" on fish biology and management. He always made time for me and we had lively discussions about the similarities and differences in approaches to aquatic and terrestrial management of populations and communities. He definitely broadened my thinking about the world and stimulated a lifelong interest in fish.

The world has lost a great thinker, teacher and Renaissance man. He will be missed. My condolences to his family.

Pat Kennedy

Pat Kennedy - September 17, 2013 at 01:52 PM

RW

“ Thanks for letting me know, Cynthia. May God's felt comfort and your memories be precious to you, your mother and entire family. Life is not destroyed by death (Phil. 1:21). Many memories are floating through my mind, including you as a baby. Then I have some tangible items: Russian postage stamps your father brought back for my collection years ago; Your father's latest book that he mailed to my late husband, Bob Vincent, with such an appreciative inscription to my Bob written in the flyleaf. The last word I had was nine months ago when your parents were selling their home with five acres and moving to a smaller one in Ft. Collins. Hopefully, this is now being a help to your mother. Your father was an extremely talented man. With loving sympathy, Ruth Vincent Willis

Ruth E. Vincent Willis - September 17, 2013 at 01:50 PM

JP

“ Dr. Behnke always made me smile when I saw him at the office. He was so generous with his knowledge and garden abundance. He was such a joy to be around. He will be missed. Joyce Pratt - Admin in FWCB

Joyce Pratt - September 17, 2013 at 01:34 PM

DR

“ I'm so sorry to hear of Bob's passing. I remember going down into the basement at Wagar Hall to seek his counsel and share recent fishing exploits. He was always free with his time and expertise regardless of what he was engaged in. Going to Rocky Mountain National Park to stalk Greenback Cutthroats with Bob will always be a treasured memory for me. It was a summer ritual for a few years.

My deepest sympathies to his family. I know all those involved with fish and fishing share your loss.

Don Rodriguez

don rodriguez - September 17, 2013 at 01:20 PM

DA

“ I knew Bob when he came to the Fish Unit in about 1966. It was clear then that Bob was something special -- the next 47 years proved that to be the case. A list of his achievements would be a long one. A real loss.

David Anderson

David Anderson - September 17, 2013 at 12:53 PM

BK

“ Dr. Behnke was indeed a great scholar and polymath. He will be missed.

B. C. Kondratieff

Boris C. Kondratieff - September 17, 2013 at 11:55 AM

KI

“ 2 files added to the album *New Album Name*



Ken Iwamasa - September 17, 2013 at 10:59 AM

BC

“ *My thoughts and prayers are with all of you. Cynthia, I have many memories of us as kids and sleepovers. Your Dad and Mom were always such wonderful people to me. I'm so sorry for your loss. Lots of love to you all.*

Becky Voorhies Ceravolo - September 16, 2013 at 05:55 PM

TW

*Here's the foreword I wrote for his great book "About Trout."
Best,
Ted Williams*

"I wish I'd had Bob Behnke for a professor." That's a statement I've often heard and often uttered myself. But not until I reread these lyrical yet scientifically precise essays did it dawn on me that he has been and is my professor and the professor of so many of us who love trout and salmon and desperately want to see them saved and restored. It's just that his teachings have come later in our lives, when we are more receptive to learning.

We mourned the loss of these living jewels from so much of their range. But we weren't sure just how we had lost them. And we didn't understand how to get them back, or even that we could.

Shining from every page of this book is Behnke's love for these beautiful and complex works of evolution, his commitment to their conservation and recovery, and his rage at those who would mix, pollute, and waste their genes. He shows how our ceaseless game of musical chairs with species and subspecies has destroyed much of the grand diversity earth was blessed with, homogenizing it into muddy sameness. You will comprehend trout and salmon not just as lovely life forms and splendid quarry but as critical parts of complicated ecosystems. You will understand how they came about, how we have squandered them and, most important, how we can recover them.

*Many of the diagnostic descriptions of the species and subspecies you will read about here were written by Dr. Behnke; and one--the Snake River finespotted cutthroat (*Oncorhynchus clarki behnke*)--was named for him. After three of them (the greenback, Bonneville and Lahontan cutthroats) had been written off as extinct, he gave them back to the world by rediscovering them in tiny, remote refuges. Now it appears that he has given us back the greenback twice. The first time was in 1969 when he found a relic population above an impassable waterfall on a nameless Colorado rill near Rocky Mountain National Park. It had to have been started there by a pioneer, a bucket biologist who ironically and accidentally preserved the race from future bucket biologists. The second time was in 2007 when greenback recovery, arguably the greatest success story in the history of the Endangered Species Act, threatened to unravel because managers had mistaken as a symptom of hybridization what Behnke believes to be remnant and naturally occurring DNA from cutthroat ancestors.*

As a reformer of perceptions and attitudes Behnke is to these fish what Aldo Leopold--the forester turned ecologist--was to mammalian predators. And, like Leopold, he differs from so many of his peers by

being not just a meticulous and tireless researcher but also a gifted wordsmith, an avid angler, and a fierce advocate for the subjects he studies. It is this passion and the ability to communicate it that makes him such an effective teacher.

His passion is a function of what Rachel Carson called a “sense of wonder,” nearly as commonly lost with age as milk teeth but something Behnke has managed to hang onto. When he cradles a native trout or salmon in the icy flow of its home water he feels as he did when he was 10 and caught his first trout below a Rippowam River mill pond in Stamford, Connecticut. It was barely seven inches long, and it had been reared in a hatchery; but it mesmerized him. “I was in awe,” he recalls. “I thought it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.” He ran home with it and placed it in a pan of water. Later that day it jumped out and died, and he proudly ate it for supper.

Like all great teachers Behnke is gentle. After I had written in Audubon magazine that “I’d been hoping” to catch a Lahontan cutthroat in Utah’s Logan River” I got a note from Bob, informing me that I was wrong, that the Logan held only Bonneville cutthroats. I countered that my reporting was absolutely accurate, that my abject ignorance did not gainsay my idle hope. My quest had been that of Dr. Seuss’ “Marco,” patiently fishing the lifeless waters of McElligot’s Pool for, among countless other creatures, whales

Ted Williams - September 18, 2013 at 07:58 AM

Dr. Robert Behnke truly was a professor. It was not just an academic title, but from its latin roots: to declare publicly. He professed the value of biological legacies representing lineages of related forms changing through time. Descent through modification caused by random events and natural selection. I was a recipient of his public and intimate declarations and was enthralled. I found my life's mission because of his class in Ichthyology. He knew that the information encoded in the transformation from the ancestral line and understanding climate changes and geologic history encapsulated the "owner's manual" for those who were given the responsibility of stewardship. It was a holy mission that we, as his students, were given commission.

His line of intellectual descent is noble. As far as I can trace back, his ancestry begins with John Henry Comstock, a noted entomologist at Cornell University, who regularly corresponded with notables as Charles Darwin (don't call me Chuck), David Starr Jordan, and Stephen A. Forbes. Comstock's prized pupil was James George Needham with whom he devised the Comstock-Needham system of studying wing venation for classification and identification of winged insects. His student, James, became a distinguished professor of entomology at Cornell. J.G. Needham begat Paul R. Needham who inherited his father's genes and intellectual influences. He too became a Obtained a Ph.D. at Cornell. To this point the recitation is pretty dry. This is where it gets interesting. This is where behavioral traits may be acquired not through genetic transmission but learning, mentorship.

Before Paul Needham became a member of the U.C. Berkeley faculty, he was a young biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Oregon during the mid-1940s. Many high dams in tributaries of the Willamette River did not allow for fish passage. He noted this in his report stating, "Maybe our salmon will follow the dodo and the passenger pigeon into the limbo of forgotten and neglected assets." (quoted from William G. Robbins, 2004. Landscapes of Conflict: The Oregon Story, 1940-2000. University of Washington Press, Seattle WA). Paul Needham then joined the Oregon Fish Commission and declared that the proposed Snake River dams would be "the beginning of the end of steelhead and salmon runs of the upper river...especially the Salmon River." (ibid.). Now the punch line (at last!)

This is what Doc would have done, would have said to the wealthy and politically powerful interests. Doc did not suffer fools, especially bureaucratic ones! I have witnessed him make witty, dry remarks that were most telling. It was as though the bully was taken apart by Cyrano de Bergerac.

Paul Needham was prescient. Doc was always right on the big issues. His ideas about saving trout and salmon were precedents for the ESA.

Doc had the good fortune to have a partner like Bob Vincent the Fisheries Unit Leader. Bob Vincent had completed his Ph.D. thesis at Michigan on the distribution of grayling in Montana and Michigan. The data suggested that action to save grayling must begin and soon. Doc was empirically developing the field of Conservation Biology while bureaucrats were trying to rein him in.

As Sons-and-Daughters of Behnke (SOBs), this is our legacy. This is what Carl Schreck and I have inculcated in our students. There are now three generations of SOBs. We have academic grandchildren and Doc is their intellectual grandfather. None of us are quite as witty and adept with dry humor as Doc. We shouldn't try. There was only one Cyrano.

I called Dr. Behnke, Doc because he reminded me of the Doc in John Steinbeck's Cannery Row (loosely based on the life of Doc Ricketts). Doc was crazy interesting and I loved that. His friends were interesting and bohemian. As they say in Portland, Oregon, "We are geeky and proud of it". I remember that Doc had introduced a guest lecturer to discuss population variation and systematic biology. This is how the introduction went,

Hiram Li - September 19, 2013 at 06:54 PM



Mostly I will miss Dr. Behnke's encyclopedic knowledge of trout and the literature. I enjoyed discussing with him the older papers about trout distribution and morphology, which he knew like the back of his hand. Oh so rarely could any of us find a tidbit that Bob had not already known and committed to memory. He was always kind and encouraging, pushing ever so gently in the right direction.

with fondest memories,

Joe Tomelleri - September 21, 2013 at 10:27 AM