



15th International Symposium on Aquatic Oligochaeta

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This volume is the proceedings for the 15th International Symposium on Aquatic Oligochaeta (ISAO15), held in Brussels, Belgium, from the 19th to 24th of September 2022. Since the first ISAO meeting was hosted by Ralph Brinkhurst in Sidney, British Columbia, Canada in 1979, our meetings have been held without interruption every three years. Just as the years seemed to be passing peacefully and our 15th ISAO was slowly coming together, the SARS-Cov-2 epidemic came suddenly into our lives, causing a complete disruption in our way of life. Although our 15th triennial symposium had originally been scheduled to convene in September 2021, we were only able to meet after going through this ordeal, four long years after our last symposium in Hirosaki, Japan, in September 2018, which was a great moment for all those who attended. Although the virus was losing the battle or, waning, it still retained some medical challenges along with cultural and financial restrictions that prevented some of our colleagues from several countries from joining us.

This 15th meeting of the ISAO has finally taken place, although with a smaller attendance than we had hoped for, yet—most importantly—allowed us to maintain the spirit and dedication to international comradery that reigns among us, favouring the open exchange of ideas that has always been the fertile ground in which our collaborations began, and in which they continue to grow and diversify. Some 20 delegates from 13 countries participated in the symposium; of these, 3 joined us as new members of our group. The diversity of countries could have been as high as 15 if unforeseen events had not caused some last-minute cancellations. In a world where research support of all biological sciences is under threat, this observation gives an interesting picture of the state of our profession: taxonomic, systematic, ecological, and physiological research on a globally diverse phylum, yet pursued by a limited and, unfortunately, dwindling number of specialists in over 50 countries.

Out of the 22 planned oral presentations (and 3 posters), 20 were given, including one by videoconference. A wide range of scientific topics were covered by the presenters, including biogeography, community ecology, environmental studies, microscopy, morphology, phylogeny, taxonomy, and annelid collection management.

The opening session of the symposium included welcoming presentations by ISAO15 host Patrick Martin, Thierry Backeljau (Head of the operational directorate “Taxonomy and Phylogeny”), and Mark J. Wetzel (General Secretary ISAO, 2006–2023). We dedicated this symposium to members of our group who have passed away since we first began to meet triennially, followed by a memoriam honouring Professor Dr. Yan-Ling Liang (Wuhan, China). Wetzel then relinquished his duties as General Secretary, ISAO (2006–2022) to Adrian Pinder, who would be serving in this new position for ISAO15. This was an opportunity to thank Mark warmly for all he has done for our community over so many years.

Half a day was devoted to the traditional microscopy session combined with poster presentations, which allowed exchanges and discussions about morphology and resulting taxonomic issues, and new research projects. On the last day of the symposium there was also a half-day workshop, organised by Rüdiger Schmelz, dedicated to the identification Enchytraeidae—a group that has put off many by its difficulty. Rüdiger also agreed to moderate a debate on the taxonomy of oligochaetes in the 21st century—an approach that must combine the classical morphological approach with the new class of characters that DNA sequencing allows.



FIGURE 1. Group picture of ISAO 15 participants and accompanying persons, taken in front of the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, Brussels, Belgium.

1—Rüdiger Schmelz; 2—Tomoaki Konno; 3—Stuart Gelder; 4—Keiko Ohtaka; 5—Akifumi Ohtaka; 6—Piotr Świątek; 7—Hanna Świątek; 8—Anna Urbisz; 9—Łukasz Urbisz; 10—Jean-François Parpet; 11—Anna J. Phillips; 12—Michal Schenk; 13—Jana Schenková; 14—Ton van Haaren; 15—Harry Tuazon; 16—Christer Erséus; 17—Patrick Martin; 18—Jan Soors; 19—Tarmo Timm; 20—Lynette Pitman; 21—Adrian Pinder; 22—Faith D. Wetzel; 23—Mark J. Wetzel; 24—Saelon Renkes; 25—Steve Fend (Photo credit: Thierry Hubin).

In addition to the scientific sessions convened at the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences in Brussels, there was a group walking tour of central Brussels on the first day, a mid-week excursion that included the Battle of Waterloo Memorial, where the fate of Europe was decided just over 200 years ago, and a walking tour of the park of the Château de la Hulpe (Domaine régional Solvay), a green setting on the edge of Brussels, and the traditional evening banquet on the last full day of the symposium.

Our 15th symposium finally ended with a business meeting to discuss various issues—those pertinent to our ISAO members as well as those affecting the aquatic oligochaete community. These discussions included a summary of the duties and responsibilities of the General Secretary, ISAO, and the history of the ISAO planning document—first drafted by Piet F.M. Verdonschot during the organization of our 9th ISAO meeting (2003, The Netherlands), and updated during the planning of each successive symposium. We then discussed the aging of and retirements within our family of aquatic oligochaetologists—highlighting the need to revitalise interest and focus on the Phylum Annelida in a global context where the interest in and support for taxonomy is under threat (see Magalhães *et al.*, 2021). We also discussed initiatives to attract the maximum number of colleagues for our next, 16th triennial symposium. In

this regard, two proposals were presented by Adrian Pinder, the new General Secretary ISAO: one submitted by László Molnár in Hungary and the submitted by Mohammed Ibrahim Naveed in India. Following discussion about attracting new scientists to our community, a Twitter account has now been setup (@ISAOLigochaetes). A brief overview of voting procedures followed during past ISAO meetings was presented—those specific to choosing the host and venue for the next, ISAO16 symposium. However, in consideration of the reduced number of participants at ISAO15, Adrian Pinder offered to organize an electronic vote to occur in the weeks following the symposium—to allow colleagues who could not join us in Brussels to also consider the offers and cast their vote. The final choice was Molnár’s offer, to convene at the eponymous Balaton Limnological Research Institute on the northern shoreline of Lake Balaton in west-central Hungary, tentatively scheduled for September 2025. The business meeting ended after a tribute to all past and present hosts of ISAO.

Almost half of the presentations made during ISAO15 have been published in this volume—including a memoriam to Professor Dr. Yan-Ling Liang (1934–2021) who devoted his career in China to the ecology and taxonomy of aquatic invertebrates, especially freshwater oligochaetes. All papers in this volume have been reviewed by two anonymous referees, proofread by at least one English-speaking reader, then accepted for publication after revised versions had been re-examined by one of the three editors of this volume.

The organising committee of the symposium consisted of Patrick Martin, Adrian Pinder, and Mark J. Wetzel, with the help of members of the ISAO15 Scientific Committee, and representatives of the dedicated staff of the Operational Directorate “Taxonomy and Phylogeny”, RBINS, Brussels, Belgium (Yves Barette, Sonia Crabbe, Laetitia Despontin, Alexandra Merland). We are grateful to all those who contributed to facilitate this symposium, a.o. CEBioS (Capacities for Biodiversity and Sustainable Development), and Visit.brussels. We are indebted to the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences for having welcomed us in the premises of the Museum, near the skeletons of the famous Bernissart Iguanodons. We look forward to our next symposium in Hungary!

Reference

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