



Figure 1: Dr Bornemissza inspecting a male *Chalcosoma atlas*.
(Photo courtesy Hobart *Mercury*)

George Bornemissza, Humboldtianer Extraordinaire

“George Bornemissza’s dung beetles will go on working in Australia until the end of time.”

This year, the Tasmanian chapter of the Australian Association of von Humboldt Fellows salutes one of our – and Australia’s – most eminent senior Humboldtians, Dr George F Bornemissza, formerly of the CSIRO Division of Entomology, Canberra.

George’s story is well known to those in the insect and pastoral world. But it is especially appropriate in this Darwin centenary year – and George’s own 86th year of life – to celebrate his pioneering work in biodiversity and ecology, on behalf of Australia.

George ‘discovered’ his passion for beetles in his early teens in his native Hungary. After a university study in Budapest, interrupted by the war and followed by the Soviet occupation and the communist takeover, he fled his homeland. He completed his PhD in Innsbruck, Austria and migrated to Australia, arriving on 31 December, 1950, with a passion to have his life and work ‘make a difference through something NEW and BIG!’

That it did! George’s 20 year long project with the CSIRO, his ‘Opus Grandis,’ was to provide the Australian pastoral industry with ‘soil helpers’ – about 50 species of bovine dung beetles, which he sourced from Africa and Mediterranean Europe, to cope with the dung from European livestock, and to enormously enhance soil fertility, animal health and productivity. Thereby, the bush was also delivered from the bushfly plagues which were almost a way of life in the outback in years gone by. George also points out that Canberrans, and many other Australians, can now enjoy an outdoor terrace latte culture, due to the abilities of his African helpers in drastically reducing bushfly numbers!

George Bornemissza has had much recognition during his long career, but he always says that it was his Alexander von Humboldt Fellowship (Munich, 1960-61) that gave his research the early boost that he needed to gain acceptance for his ideas. Among his other accolades and achievements are: Britannica Award, 1973, 'For his application of ecology for human benefit'; Rolex Award for Enterprise, 1982; Order of Australia (OAM), 2001, 'For the success of introduced dung beetles in Australia'; Emeritus Fellow, Entomology, CSIRO, 2006; and Australian Geographic Conservationist of the Year, 2008. There are also many new species of dung and other beetles which George discovered, among which are his favourites: *Scarabaeus bornemisszai* and *Sisyphus bornemisszanus*.

But, we should not think that George has had a quiet life in Tasmania since his 'retirement' here in 1983! When I first met George in 1997 (on the occasion of the visit to Tasmania of the then General Secretary of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, Dr Manfred Osten), George confessed to me that he was working about 50 hours per week, that he cooked for himself twice a week, and froze his food for several days at a time, to make more time for research! His second major life project, his 'Opus Magnus', has been steadily built up to become one of the most comprehensive and spectacular mounted displays of beetles anywhere in the world. The fruits of these labours are already to be seen in George's magnificent exhibits at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. This is a lasting contribution to raising awareness of the need for habitat and biodiversity protection, while attracting the younger generations. The collection is designed eventually to have over 130 drawers and to comprise over 8,000 specimens. George has now surpassed the hundredth-drawer mark and is working to complete the display, his failing eyesight permitting.

We salute you, George – may the beetles protect you!

From Peter Jarvis, with Jo McIntyre
Hobart, March 2009



Figure 2: George in Botswana, 11th Feb 1972, celebrating his 48th birthday in style watching *Pachylomera* beetles demolishing an elephant dropping. (© CSIRO Australia)



Figure 3: George examining a small selection of dung beetles which he collected on four continents – Australia, Africa, Mediterranean Europe and the Orient. (© CSIRO Australia)