

## Obituary: Tatiana I. Kotenko, 1949-2013



On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March, after almost two years of struggling with the consequences of a severe car accident in Jordan, we have lost an outstanding Ukrainian herpetologist: Tatiana I. Kotenko (née Sitko). She passed away in the time when she was at the peak of her professional carrier, with numerous running projects and full of ideas for further studies.

Tatiana was born on October 14, 1949 in Kiev, in the family of the musician Ivan Sitko, music editor of state radio Elena Vasilchenko. Her lifelong interest in animals arose already during the school years, and she was a young naturalist in the Kiev Zoo. In 1967 she became a student of Biological Faculty of Kiev University. She graduated from the University with honorary award in 1972 and defended her diploma thesis “Habitat-related morphometric variation in the sand lizard”. After a few months working as laboratory assistant in Kiev University in 1972, she got a Ph.D. fellowship at the Institute of Zoology of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences in Kiev and studied ecol-

ogy, morphological variation and distribution of reptiles of the left-bank steppe of Ukraine. This study was supervised by two prominent Ukrainian zoologists, Prof. Mikhail Voinstvensky and Prof. Nikolay Shcherbak. In 1975 she wrote her first scientific paper devoted to diurnal cycle of activity of *Eremias arguta deserti* (Sitko, 1975). After finishing her fellowship, she worked 1976-1978 as a teacher at Kiev University. She led seminars on evolution and general zoology, gave practical lessons, and supervised research by students. In January 1979, she became a research scientist in the Department of Population Ecology and Conservation of Vertebrates in the Institute of Zoology of Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, and has been working there until 2013. In May 1983 she defended her Ph.D. thesis “Reptiles of the Left-Bank Steppe of Ukraine”. Her Ph.D. thesis volume included 550 manuscript pages, with the amount of material being much beyond the requirements for a doctoral thesis. In the same year she was awarded by the Steering Com-

mittee of the Academy of Sciences of Ukraine for a series of publications resulting from her Ph.D. study. A part of this comprehensive research was devoted to the lizard *Eremias arguta* and summarized in the monograph "The Steppe runner" edited by Nikolay Shcherbak (1993; Tatiana was the single author of eight chapters and co-author of further six chapters).

For many years the main field of her research was the ecology of all reptiles inhabiting the steppe zone of Ukraine. For some of these species, the steppe runner, the steppe viper, as well as the sand lizard and the pond turtle, which were of particular interest for her, she also investigated the variation in life-history and external morphology, intraspecific systematics, distribution, etc.

Being an outstanding expert for basic research in zoology, Tatiana also did a lot for nature protection. She participated in developing the national web of protected areas, contributed prominently to all editions of the Red Data Book of Ukraine and an inventory of rare species of reptiles in Ukraine, and organized practical actions to protect steppes. She was a member of the editorial board of the *Vestnik Zoologii* (the main zoological journal in Ukraine), an expert of the IUCN, and a member of many nature conservation and zoological societies.

Every year, she spent the whole spring and autumn in the field, usually alone, sometimes accompanied by a few colleagues or students. She has stopped this activity neither at severe times after the collapse of the Soviet Union nor in the last years of her life when she experienced increasing health problems and was overloaded by writing numerous scientific papers and by official duties in the Institute. This brave woman travelled alone across the whole southern Ukraine, lowland Crimea and adjacent regions making dozens kilometres per day, using all kind of transport; she stayed overnight in a tent or in houses of local people who were inspired by her enthusiasm and dedication to science. There has remained virtually no place in

her study area where she did not spend at least a couple of days. She went kayaking most of rivers in Left-Bank Ukraine, visited the majority of remaining steppe patches in Ukraine. Nobody could stand along with her ability working day and night under harsh field circumstances.

Good command in English, social competence and high standards of research made her the main representative of Ukraine at numerous international meetings and projects which linked the post-Soviet Ukrainian science with the international scientific community. In the early 1990s, she was the coordinator of the World Bank project "Conservation of biodiversity in the Danube delta" in Romania and Ukraine; this study contributed substantially to the establishment of the Danube biosphere reserve in the Ukrainian part of the delta. Later on she participated in numerous bilateral Ukrainian-European projects (inventory of steppe territories in the Crimea, assessment of the current state of herpetofauna in the Sivash area, impact of melioration on the fauna of southern Ukraine, as well as in numerous studies on the variability and intraspecific taxonomy of reptiles and amphibians in Ukraine and adjacent regions). She attended the first and the third World Congresses of Herpetology, nearly all meetings of the *Societas Europaea Herpetologica*, of the Nikolsky Herpetological Society, the Ukrainian Herpetological Society, the symposia on European pond turtles, on the biology of vipers, various workshops and seminars, often being there the only participant from Ukraine. The list of her publications encompasses more than 200 titles, including nine monographs and six popular books written in three languages (Russian, English and Ukrainian).

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