

Interview: 70th birthday of Pavel Kocourek. Diplopodologist, painter and teacher

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Abstract. Pavel Kocourek is a Czech diplopodologist known mainly thanks to two monographs on millipedes of Czech Republic and Prague. To mark his anniversary, three of his closest colleagues decided to prepare an interview with him, and to introduce him also from a probably unknown point of view.

Abstrakt. Rozhovor k sedmdesátinám Pavla Kocourka. Diplopodologa, malíře a učitele. Český diplopodolog Pavel Kocourek je známý především díky dvěma monografiím o mnohonožkách České republiky a Prahy. Tři jeho nejbližší spolupracovníci se s Pavlem rozhodli k jeho výročí udělat rozhovor a představit ho tak, jak ho možná ostatní kolegové neznají.

Keywords. Anniversary, biography, education, illustrations, millipedes, popularization

1. Introduction

Pavel Kocourek celebrated his 70th birthday on 23 April 2018. On this occasion, Petr Dolejš, Andrej Mock and Karel Tajovský prepared a set of questions for an interview with Pavel. The interview was led by Petr Dolejš who asked Pavel during two visits at the National Museum in Prague (19 July 2018) and at Pavel's home in Chyňava (1 August 2018). The interview was held in Czech, then translated by the enquirer and checked by Milan Kocourek (London).

2. Interview

Pavel, what has influenced you to become interested in the study of nature?

I was not good in math (laughing). My father's love of nature influenced me: staying often in nature, observing, collecting products of nature as well as a small microscope that I got as a child.

Did your family influence you? How would you “paint” in words your mum, daddy and sibs?

I grew up with my brother and lived with my parents in Prague. My father was an academic painter – he showed me how to paint landscapes and how to know plants. My mother was taking care of all of us, she liked singing and she taught me many folk songs. My older brother was playing guitar, leading small bands, but in fact he was a field surveyor. The whole family spent holidays outside Prague.

Where did you then spend most of your childhood? What were you like as a boy?

I spent my childhood in Prague, the Polabí region and in the Českomoravská Vysočina Highlands. I liked wandering in nature as a boy, I wanted to discover everything, forecast weather, everything! I was collecting fossils, minerals, feathers, chewing-gum wrappings. I remember collecting gemstones at alluvium by Kolín or catching crayfish in a brook near Humpolec. While I was walking in nature, I was drawing and painting a lot. And I was also learning how to play guitar.

You are a son of an academic painter and you definitively inherited his skills. How important is painting in your life?

A nice question. It's a kind of self fulfilment – painting is an elixir of life. I have been drawing since I was three years old, when I went to bed with a pencil. I was also drawing during lessons. Painting is easier for me than writing articles. Me and colours understand one another – if I write something, I want to rip it up and throw it away.

What is your favourite place to paint?

I like to paint natural scenery, bouquets, flowers, animals, lichens as well as details from the microscope. I also like abstract themes. Holland was my favourite place for painting; it's a country of many excellent painters.

Was Holland the farthest country you travelled to get a good view?

No, it wasn't. The Hluhluwe Reserve in South Africa was the farthest place. I painted waves coming to the shore of the Indian Ocean. I put the drawings into a tube and when I came back, I realized that the tube got lost. But I took a photo of the shore, so I have at least the photograph. There was a fisherman with a long fishing rod; waves, sand, the fisherman and nothing else (Fig. 1). I was impressed. I was also painting during meetings of teachers of environmental education in Europe as well as during myriapodological congresses.

What techniques do you use? Is there any “evolution” in your style?

I painted using watercolours during the trips with my father and I abided by the technique for about 30 years. Occasionally, I used oil paint. When I studied art, I came to temperas (Fig. 2), gouache (mixed temperas and watercolours) and graphics. Later, I preferred semi-fat pastel or tacked sepia (Figs. 3–4). I also discovered a technique: I was painting a field of corn poppy in Rakovník area – a red splotch in landscape – and was using semifat pastels “progresso”. Suddenly, I realized that the colour doesn't increase



Figure 1: Seashore of Indian Ocean in Mtunzini by Durbanu in South Africa, 2002. Photograph: Pavel Kocourek.



Figure 2: Křivoklátsko PLA viewed from Čertova skála Rock, tempera, 1999. Original: Pavel Kocourek.



Figure 3: At Seč reservoir, Železné hory PLA, tacked sepia, 1992. Original: Pavel Kocourek.



Figure 4: Pavel Kocourek is painting the previous topic (Fig. 3), 1992. Photograph: Jana Kocourková.

its intensity because I was holding the pastel upside down. However, the picture became glossy! So I polished the whole picture with the pastel (Fig. 5). You can sever the colour by the pastel, so than it looks like drops, like raining. But I also use paints for walls or acrylic paints.

Could people see your paintings on any exhibitions?

I had several exhibitions, but it isn't my main interest, it's a hobby. I had a large exhibition in Prague when I was nine, and my drawings were sent to exhibitions in India or Japan. I also illustrated zoological (Andreska et al. 1999, Fig. 6) and botanical textbooks (Střihavková & Kuzmín 1971), articles on archaeology, botany or ornithology. I exhibited landscape-paintings in Czechia as well in Europe. Recently, I exhibited illustrations of millipedes in Zbečno, Olomouc (Fig. 7), and Košice or Prešov.

That's amazing! How could you, as a 9-year boy, have an own exhibition in Prague?

Well, my father helped me. He was a painter, taught me how to draw and collect my drawings. The exhibition was organised by the Ministry of education in Prague, Pohořelec.

Which exhibition do you treat as the most important?

Always the last one. There are either exhibitions of landscapes, or millipedes. Concerning the latter, it was the one at the gallery in Zbečno in Křivoklátsko PLA. From the landscape exhibitions, I enjoyed the one in Naarden in Holland. A lot of paintings were shown there. And I also sold a lot of them.

When did you start combining painting and the study on millipedes?

I started collecting millipedes more intensively when I was 20. I drew their habitus (Fig. 8) as well as details and made hundreds of permanent slides of gonopods that I drew afterwards using a microscope (Fig. 9). I still do it today, I put aside the landscape painting. A nice example of joining painting and millipedes was a design of a diplopodological T-shirt (see cover picture of this issue).

How did you approach to paint the millipedes? How does it differ from landscape-painting?

When drawing millipedes, there's a great stress on accuracy, correct ratios between each body parts or gonopods. Colour of each species is also important. Animals in nature are brighter than those preserved in ethanol. Several species are more variable, e.g. body colour of *Cylindroiulus caeruleocinctus* varies from pale grey to black. You have to choose one colour and draw it. When drawing gonopods, it is important to keep the position that is in classical identification keys (e.g. SCHUBART 1934). In any case, the microscope technique is better today, so more details are visible. For instance, the tips of glomerid gonopods are more complex in reality than shown in SCHUBART (1934). I tried drawing a lot and looking for differences. I made hundreds of drawings.

Pavel, do you always paint after a concrete specimen, or do you try to draw a general “prototype”, i.e. typical habitus in characteristic position?

I draw a concrete individual but I try to match the characteristic position.

After the end of your study, there is almost a 30-year gap between your first and second paper about millipedes. What did you do during this time?

Drinking wine and selling bottles (laughing). I did something different, of course. When Prof. Lang passed away, I pushed ahead nature conservation, ornithology, botany, lichenology and environmental education. I taught at various types of schools, I led brigades of young nature conservationists that also my three children attended: Pavel, Jana and Iva. I organised summer nature camps, meetings of teachers from environmental schools and acted as a head of nature competitions.

What of these professions were the most important for you, which gave you most for your life?

It was the profession as a teacher at the primary school, for sure. It required a large dose of patience and persistence. I always learned something new with children. Children at the primary schools are candid and immediate: no stress. But I felt much better as a university teacher; I could easily involve my students into study of millipedes. My former students became my good friends or colleagues in the course of time. They are people who helped me these days.

How did you get back to millipedes?

I got back to systematic study of millipedes as a teacher at the Faculty of Education of the Charles University in Prague in 1998. An important moment was when Prof. Jan Buchar from the Faculty of Science sent me to Dr. Karel Tajovský from the Institute of Soil Biology of the Czech Academy of Sciences. Thanks to him, I met further European scientists, got access to literature and could attend myriapodological congresses.

Did you have to cope with a lot of changes that had appeared in myriapodology during the 30 years? I think that it was very difficult to orient in the branch after a so long period of diametrically different activities.

Yes, of course. There was a lot of new information and knowledge from other authors. The taxonomy changed dramatically. In several cases, my students informed me about new names of millipedes. New classification on the web-pages Fauna Europaea brought further changes. Remarkable changes appeared within the genus *Glomeris*.

Millipede taxonomy may seem as a boring topic for faunistics. On the contrary, have you got any crazy experience with collecting millipedes?

Sure. As a student of the Faculty of Education, I collected an unknown chordeumatid to me near the castle Zbořený Kostelec in the corridor of Sázava River. I carefully drew the details and made permanent slides of male gonopods (Fig. 10). But even professor Lang could not determine it. So I put disappointedly



Figure 5: A field of red poppy at Rakovník area, 1984. Original: Pavel Kocourek.

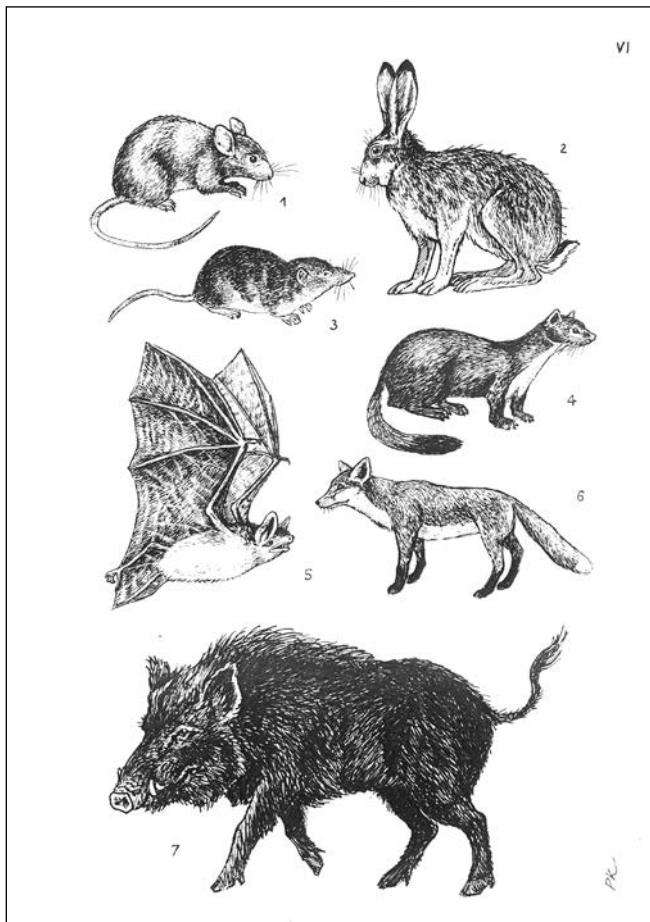


Figure 6: Illustrations for a zoological textbook, 1999. Original: Pavel Kocourek.



Figure 7: Pavel Kocourek (on the right) with Andrej Mock and illustrations of millipedes at the 16th ICM in Olomouc, 2014. Photograph: Petr Dolejš.

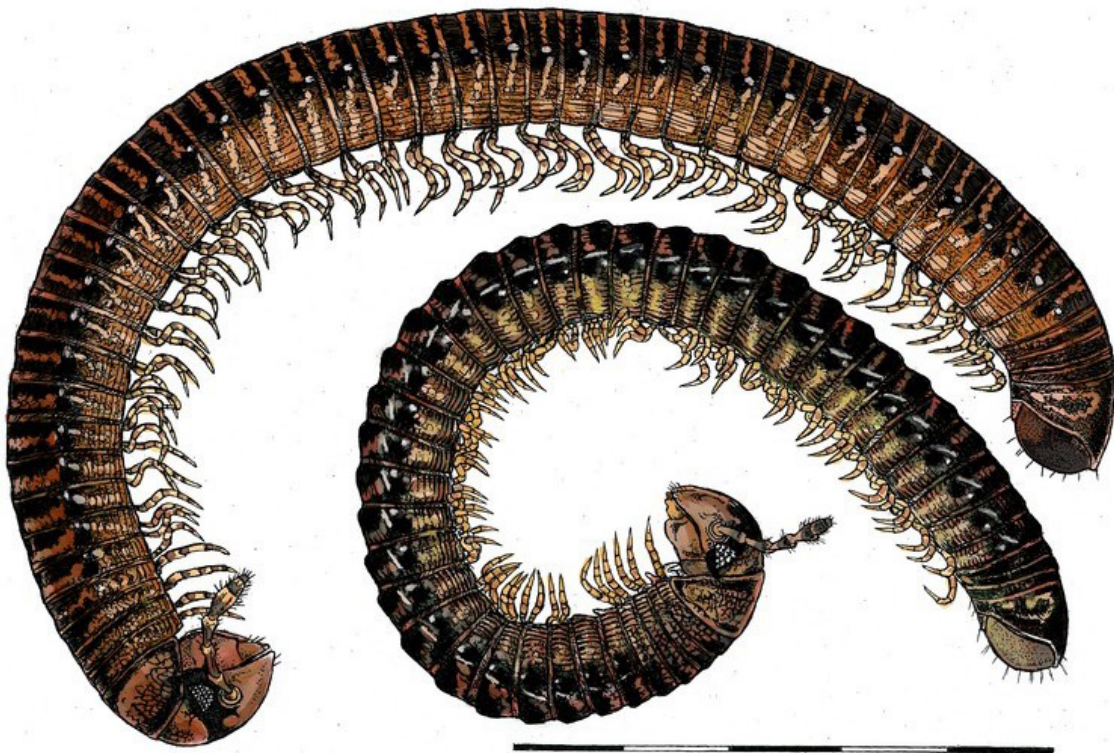


Figure 8: *Cylindroiulus truncorum* (Silvestri, 1896), illustration. Original: Pavel Kocourek.

the unlabelled slides into a box. After 30 years, I checked the slides and I threw three unlabelled away, in a laboratory of the Faculty of Education. Incidentally, I sorted reprints in the evening and found a work of assistant professor Ján Gulička who described a new species, endemic to central Europe. I thought about where have I seen these figures of gonopods before? I took my notebook from the year 1972 and I found them drawn there! They were on those three slides that I had thrown away. So I asked my student, Ivana Skoumalová, to help me with looking for them. The rubbish was already thrown away from the laboratory. But the charwoman told us that the sacks with rubbish are still in the ground floor of the building. We took three large blue sacks filled with rubbish back to the laboratory and sorted them out like in a detective story. We found three untouched slides at the bottom of the last sack: *Listrocheiritium septentrionale*. I labelled the slides and stored them again in the box.

Prof. Jaroslav Lang was your supervisor (author of the monograph Diplopoda of the Czechoslovakia 1954). What was your relationship with him during this time and how would you characterise him now?

Professor Lang was both strict and patient, and a kind teacher. He was an authority for me. He taught me how to collect millipedes and make permanent slides. He gave me a microscope that he got for his first scientific work. And that he made mistakes? I recognised it many years later and I perceived that his ability to determine millipedes was influenced by his very bad eyesight.

For collecting millipedes, you should have some experience. Was there any unusual place where you discovered millipedes?

When I conducted an inventory research in the Brdy Protected Landscape Area, I had a special permit to enter a military area with 30-years-old abandoned barracks for Soviet soldiers. I found two millipede species in the second floor under billowy parquet: *Nopoiulus kochii* and *Proteroiulus fuscus*! The room was covered with algae and moss, the parquets were torn out here and there, windows were broken, mildew was growing there as well as forest mushrooms.

Do you continue in collecting millipedes? What are you currently working on?

I'm working "on" a garden (laughing). In the branch, I'm doing inventory researches in Bohemian Karst Protected Landscape Area and I work on an atlas of distribution of millipedes in the Czech Republic in the last 60 years. I'm searching for new places and biotopes where some interesting species could live. I am also revising and identifying old items from the collection of the National Museum in Prague.

Which publications do you consider the most important?

They are the "Millipedes of Prague" (2013) and "Millipedes of the Czech Republic" (2017) where I fulfilled myself both as a myriapodologist and a graphic designer. Both books are richly illustrated with paintings of millipedes and drawing of male gonopods and other characters useful for identification.

What are your future plans?

The atlas of distribution of millipedes in the Czech Republic. I will take the inventory researches in Czech protected landscapes areas up again. And I plan further cooperation with the National Museum in Prague. After a longer time, I'd like to paint landscapes once again. My dream is to prepare an exhibition combining paintings of both landscapes and millipedes. A possibility would be the Central Bohemian Museum in Roztoky near Prague.

What is your life philosophy?

I've got a joke cut out from an old journal: "Do you know what happiness is? Not to ask stupid questions." I'm optimistic and nature is a church for me. I had a lot of interests and I have the feeling that I'm living two lives that overlap. Sport, nature, painting, archaeology... family, nature, fruit and vegetable garden close to my house and friends, including my former students, are sources of my life certainty.

What is, according to you, the most important for students of myriapodology?

Good scientific literature, access to a microscope and IT technique, study of foreign languages, observing and drawing, Czech nomenclature of millipedes. In general interest, endurance and ability to overcome difficulties in life and study.

It sounds as a wish. Thank you for the interview and I wish you you stay as enthusiastic and optimistic as you are.

3. Curriculum Vitae

Name: Pavel Kocourek

Born: 23 April 1948 in Prague

Education:

1992–1994: Postgraduate student of Art at the Faculty of Education, Charles University in Prague

1982–1984: Postgraduate student of Ecology at Czech University of Life Sciences Prague

1975: Degree PaedDr. at Faculty of Education, Charles University in Prague

1966–1970: Faculty of Education, Charles University in Prague

Employment:

2012: Retired

2008–2012: Teacher –at the primary schools in Loděnice and Hořovice

2007–2008: Director of the primary school in Olešnice v Orlických horách

2006–2007: Official of the Regional Office of the Central Bohemian Region in Prague

1998–2006: Teacher at the Faculty of Education, Charles University in Prague

1992–1998: Director of the primary school in Kolečovice

1970–1992: Teacher at the primary schools in Kněžves, Čerčany, Týnec nad Sázavou, Pyšely and Brandýs nad Labem-Stará Boleslav



Figure 9: Pavel Kocourek working with a stereomicroscope in the National Museum, 2017. Photograph: Petr Dolejš.



Figure 10: Gonopod of *Listrocheiritium septentrionale* Gulička, 1965, illustration. Original: Pavel Kocourek.

Other activities:

2015–present: Cooperation with the National Museum in Prague

1992–1998: Head of Czech Union for Nature Conservation; Chair of association “Environment”

1991–1995: Evaluating flora in Rakovník District

1985–present: Inventory researches of millipedes in Protected Landscape Areas

1973–1998: Leading summer camps for young environmentalists

1972–1980: Proposing protected areas and nature trails

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