

DAVID ST. AUBIN (1952–2002)

Imagine the scene. Dave, strong, youthful and sharp-eyed, poised to leap off the bow of a swift-turning zodiac, hurl himself into the frigid Arctic waters, and deftly place a hoop-net over the head of a thrashing beluga whale. Each evening we would sit quietly on the cliffs, sharing the satisfaction of a good day's work and a sip of the traditional Navy rum, though yes, he would have preferred a cool glass of beer. The spectacle of the hundreds of belugas just below the bluff, rubbing in the shallows of Cunningham Inlet, made this one of Dave's favourite places. He was, after all, the one who had found out why belugas were there. They come every July to rub off their old yellowed skin and rapidly renew their snow-white epidermis. Dave was the first to document that a whale could actually moult, in a peculiar kind of mammalian way.

Dave started his research career as an assistant at the Arctic Biological Station, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, in Ste. Anne de Bellevue, Québec, only a stone's throw from Hudson, where he grew up. His first research was on microscopic phytoplankton, but he quickly worked his way up the trophic pyramid to the seals and whales that later became his lifelong interest. The research station was small, with only 40 or so employees, all of whom had spent much of their time in the North. Dave was right at home among them, and soon his talents as a field biologist grew as long and brilliant as the Arctic summer sun that would light his entire career. Physically fit and mentally agile, Dave could work on any team, and did. He contributed everywhere, in every way.

Dave was clear in his vision and goals. In 1973, he decided on graduate training. Riding a wave of powerful recommendations, he arrived at the University of Guelph to join up with one of us (JRG), then a professor in the Department of Pathology at the Ontario Veterinary College. Dave earned his Master's degree and Ph.D., both with honours. His theses remain on a prominent shelf for their fine lesson in scientific writing. From the moment Dave arrived at the University until the day he left 21 years later, the three of us worked together from the Arctic to the tropics, from Maritime Canada to Florida, from Holman Island to South America to Hawaii—observing, studying, documenting, learning. We lived and laughed together in strange hotels, abandoned lighthouses, ramshackle huts, creaking boats, and oddly comfortable tents. While setting a tent on a small spit of land along the Beaufort Sea in 1974, Dave learned of the birth of his first son, Marc. No scientific discovery then or since would so capture the proud look in his soft blue eyes. Then came Dianne and Eric, and the beginning of years of dedicated fatherhood. That gave Dave the opportunity to do something new with his lifelong passion for sports. He coached, first his children, then their schoolmates. He coached soccer, gymnastics, hockey (he was a master on skates), and any other activity that claimed to be sport. He loved playing, too, mostly on teams and always in the thick of it. As he slowed



David St. Aubin. (Photo: Eric St. Aubin.)

a bit nearing the age of 50, he spoke proudly of playing on the same hockey line as his younger son Eric, who now occupied centre position.

It was there, at team centre, that Dave made huge contributions to understanding what keeps marine mammals healthy; how they respond when their environment becomes fouled; why a porpoise comes ashore where it can't survive; how viruses, bacteria and other bugs take root in animals that become weak; and how strangely wonderful it is to see a bottlenose dolphin chasing fish onto a warm South Carolina beach and gobbling them up as it slides back to sea. Dave noted and relished every detail.

In 1993, Dave went to Mystic Marine Life Aquarium as Director of Research and Veterinary Services. While south of the Canadian border, his interests and involvement in Arctic research grew stronger than ever. Dave maintained active programs on ringed seals and beluga whales with his Canadian colleagues, helping to develop new approaches and make seemingly impossible field projects succeed. He enjoyed spinning tales about his adventures, and with his guitar could set them to tunes. One favourite tale told of the time he was involved in tagging beluga whales and then trying to capture them again 200 miles away. The success of this wildly challenging task was largely due to Dave's physical prowess, determination, and experience. When a complicated device meant to introduce a large transmitter into a beluga's stomach failed miserably, he simply shoved the package all the way in, using the entire length of his arm. And it was Dave who, 20 years before, had raced along a Cape Cod beach to hand-capture the one harbour seal that would reveal the cause of the very first viral epidemic recorded in marine mammals.

As a communicator, Dave was at his best: a developer of crystal-clear proposals, editor of important scientific

monographs, and organizer of conferences. He was able to put together the “get it done” talents of a great field worker and productive biologist, but also to promote his science quietly but effectively. Leadership was Dave’s currency, honesty his dictum. He never said it in those words, but we all knew it.

By today’s measure, 50 years is a disappointingly short life, but Dave never wasted a moment and accomplished much. All of us who knew him are deeply saddened and chastened by his early death. We will always miss him.

In the chill autumn air of an Arctic tent camp, when we are reluctant to leave the warmth of our sleeping bags, we will remember that it was usually you, Dave, who already

stood by the roaring Coleman stove, brewing our first, much-needed pot of coffee.

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