Colin Groves (1942–2017)

Evolutionary biologist who brought taxonomy to life.

Taxonomy allows us to manage and investigate the bewildering complexity of the living world. Most of us take a sound taxonomy for granted, but thankfully a few generous souls work to make sure the taxonomic house is kept in good order. Colin Groves was an old-school whole-animal biologist who gave taxonomy, and its implications for conservation, the attention it deserves. In doing so he furthered not only his own research agenda, but also the research agendas of many others.

Groves, who died on 30 November 2017, conducted much of his fieldwork in museums poring over seldom-accessed skeletal collections. His method was to assemble as large and as geographically diverse a sample as possible of a mammalian taxon in order to critically evaluate the case for lumping or splitting a particular species.

Groves' taxonomic and geographic scope was broad, and the list of groups he investigated reads like the inventory of a major zoo — he contributed to major revisions of the taxonomies of primates and ungulates, and he worked on mammals from Asia, Africa and Australia. He also made influential, and characteristically iconoclastic, contributions to several debates about human evolutionary history.

Groves was born on 24 June 1942 in Enfield, an outer suburb of London. As a teenager, he would visit what is now the Natural History Museum. His father was a travel agent, so even as a youngster Groves was no stranger to overseas travel. He went to a boarding school, Lancing College, where his interests in natural history and art were encouraged. Groves wanted to study zoology at university, but his father pushed for a degree in linguistics; they compromised on anthropology at University College London.

Groves focused on biological anthropology and for his postgraduate research he decided to work with John Napier, then the doyen of British primatology and human evolution research, in the Unit of Primatology and Human Evolution at the Royal Free Hospital Medical School in London. Napier suggested that gorilla taxonomy was in need of care and attention, so Groves used multivariate methods to characterize variation among

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more than 700 gorilla crania. After the award of his PhD in 1966, Groves taught at the University of California, Berkeley, then at the London branch of the Smithsonian Institution's Primate Biology Program, which Napier opened in 1969, and after that at Cambridge University.

Groves was appointed to his first, and only, faculty position at the Australian National University (ANU) in 1973. The following year he moved to Canberra to join ANU's School of General Studies. As it turned out, Australia and the ANU suited Groves to a tee. In an interview not long before his death, he said that, at the ANU, "I can work on what I want, I can dress how I want and I can teach what I want. I thought I'd come over for three or four years and see how I like it, and I'm still here." He rose through the academic ranks, and while doing so he found the time and space to write seminal books and papers on pure and applied taxonomy, as well as making important contributions to taxonomic theory.

His 1989 book *A Theory of Primate and Human Evolution* tackled many of the thorniest issues in palaeoanthropology, and offered solutions that were far from mainstream. Groves argued that heterochrony and centrifugal speciation played major roles in the evolutionary change he observed within what we now call the hominin clade. He was an early and ardent advocate for cladistic methods, and together with Czech colleague Vratislav Mazák, proposed the recognition of a new species, *Homo ergaster*. More recently he worked tirelessly to debunk the more irrational interpretations of *Homo floresiensis* from Flores that have been doing the rounds.

Although primates, and especially apes, were the focus of Groves' research, his interests were unusually, and perhaps even uniquely, eclectic. Asses, bandicoots, deer, elephants, gazelles, horses, pigs and rhinoceroses attracted his attention at one time or another. Groves was particularly respected for his thoughtful and scholarly reviews of ape taxonomy, and just a few weeks before he died he was a co-author on a paper that presented cogent evidence for a second species of orangutan on the island of Sumatra. His wide interests made his opinions especially valuable.

Groves was a scholar who wore his encyclopaedic erudition lightly. He was particularly helpful to students and seemingly never tired of answering the hundreds of enquiries that came his way. When I was editing an encyclopaedia of human evolution, he was my go-to source for any question involving nomenclature. If I sent him a question during the evening, a considered and helpful reply would nearly always be waiting in my inbox the next morning.

Groves was particularly interested in endangered species, and in many ways he was one himself. In an era when universities are ever more 'corporate', I cannot imagine a department hiring a taxonomist, especially one whose interests are metaphorically, and literally, all over the map. His many colleagues miss him already, and biology will lament the eventual extinction of researchers and scholars with the breadth of interest that Groves displayed. ❐

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