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## Obituary

# Leonard Joseph Victor Compagno (1943–2024): the greatest shark expert of the 20th century

L Rochat<sup>1</sup>, J Pollerspöck<sup>2</sup> , FH Mollen<sup>3</sup> , E Sperone<sup>4</sup> , FR Reinero<sup>5</sup>  and P Micarelli<sup>6</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> AfriOceans Conservation Alliance, Cape Town, South Africa

<sup>2</sup> Bavarian State Collection of Zoology, Munich, Germany

<sup>3</sup> Elasmobranch Research, Bonheiden, Belgium

<sup>4</sup> Department of Biology, Ecology and Earth Sciences, University of Calabria, Rende, Italy

<sup>5</sup> Sharks Studies Centre – Scientific Institute, Massa Marittima, Italy

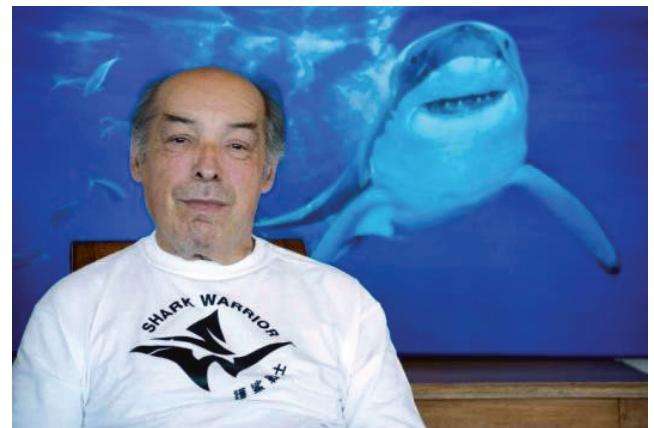
<sup>6</sup> Department of Physical Sciences, Earth and Environment, University of Siena, Siena, Italy

\* Author for correspondence: [primo.micarelli@unisi.it](mailto:primo.micarelli@unisi.it)

On 25 September 2024, Leonard J.V. Compagno passed away peacefully at age 81 in Simonstown, South Africa. The world of marine biology owes much to 'Len', a true pioneer in the field of research on chondrichthyans. His long and groundbreaking career involved higher systematics, alpha-taxonomy, ecology and conservation, and established him as possibly the greatest shark expert of the 20th century.

Leonard was born on 4 December 1943 in San Francisco, California. From a young age he developed a passion for the sea and its mysterious creatures. His awards started early in his career, beginning with Harvard University and Stanford University scholarships for graduate work in 1965, resulting in his first academic paper on shark teeth, followed by a postdoctoral award by the U.S. National Science Foundation in 1972, and a postdoctoral fellowship in 1983 from the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) in South Africa. He obtained his PhD from Stanford University, California, in 1979, for research on the morphology, systematics and phylogeny of carcharhinoid sharks. His other awards include the prestigious Gilchrist Memorial Medal in 2008, which is awarded every 3 years to a distinguished marine scientist by the South African Network for Coastal and Oceanic Research (SANCOR), and the Robert H. Gibbs, Jr. Memorial Award for Excellence in Systematic Ichthyology in 2009, a prestigious recognition presented by the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists. In 2016 he was honoured yet again for his achievements in shark research when he received the Galileo Award and was selected for inclusion in the Galileo Academy of Science & Technology Hall of Merit, San Francisco Unified School District.

Combining solid academic training with relentless curiosity and dedication, Compagno devoted himself to the study of sharks, rays and chimaeras, with a particular focus on their classification, ecology and behaviour. He held several distinguished positions, including Professorship at the Romberg Tiburon Center for Environmental Studies at San Francisco State University, and Honorary Research



Associate at the J.L.B. Smith Institute of Ichthyology (now SAIAB), South Africa. He was Head of the Shark Research Centre and Curator of Fishes in the Division of Life Sciences at Iziko Museums, Cape Town, South Africa, from which he retired. He was also an Honorary Research Associate in the Department of Zoology at the University of Cape Town, a Fellow of the Royal Society of South Africa, Regional Vice-Chair of the Executive Board of the IUCN SSC Shark Specialist Group, a research consultant for the Fisheries and Aquaculture Division of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Director of the Shark Research Institute in the United States, Director of the AfriOceans Conservation Alliance in South Africa, and Chief Scientist for the Save Our Seas Foundation.

Compagno's output is considered the most extensive in chondrichthyan literature. In addition to numerous original research papers, these include several books, book chapters, monographs, field guides, regional checklists, reports, essays, conference abstracts and popular articles (see [www.shark-references.com](http://www.shark-references.com))—a body of work that has changed the way both the scientific community and the

public look at these enigmatic and often feared animals.

Early in his career, his groundbreaking contributions dealt with higher systematics, followed by in-depth revisions within the order Carcharhiniformes, and complemented with descriptions of numerous taxa. These include two new shark families, 10 new genera (7 sharks, 3 rays) and 37 new species (19 sharks, 15 rays and 3 chimaeras) which are all still valid to date. These descriptions were all published in a span of 45 years (1971–2016), at an average publication rate of at least one new taxon per year. The most spectacular is most likely that of the megamouth shark *Megachasma pelagios* Taylor, Compagno and Struhsaker, 1983. Compagno also added considerably to our knowledge of rare and lesser-known cartilaginous species.

In nearly all his essays on systematics and taxonomy, Compagno included much skeletal information, such as descriptions of teeth and detailed morphology of the braincase. The many 'LJVC' collection numbers mentioned in many of his publications, and displayed on countless jars in the fish collection of the Iziko South African Museum, serve as a reminder of his tremendous efforts to secure and examine material. His attention to detail and scientific rigour have been appreciated by researchers around the world and will long still serve as a standard. He was also available to collaborate with young researchers by providing appropriate advice and observations for the optimisation of scientific articles that he considered useful to support.

Compagno's most famous and popular works are the *FAO species catalogue, Vol. 4: Sharks of the world* (1984), and *Sharks of the world* (2005, written with Marc Dando and Sarah Fowler), the first single-volume, illustrated field guide to sharks, which went through several later editions. His project 'Rays of the world' aimed to create a ray catalogue in a similar format, which instead resulted in the only quality checklists (in 1999, 2005 and 2007) on batoid diversity available to the growing number of experts and enthusiasts around the globe interested in this taxon. In recognition of Compagno's tremendous scientific output, the lanternshark species *Etmopterus compagno* Fricke and Koch, 1990, and the skate species *Leucoraja compagno* (Stehmann, 1995) were named in his honour.

Compagno was a strong advocate for shark conservation throughout his career. He paid much attention to the decline of shark populations caused by overexploitation and the trade in their fins, and his work has had a positive impact in raising awareness among the public and governments about the importance of protecting shark populations as crucial for ocean ecosystem health. He participated in important international initiatives, such as collaborating with the IUCN to improve shark conservation policies, and contributing to CITES lists of various cartilaginous fishes. He provided scientific support to conservation assessments of the whale

shark *Rhincodon typus* and basking shark *Cetorhinus maximus* which led to each species being successfully listed on CITES Appendix II in 2002, and his data provided updates to each species' status on the 2004 IUCN Red List, as well as to inclusion of the white shark *Carcharodon carcharias* on both lists in 2004. Perhaps most importantly, he contributed to the full protection of the white shark in South Africa in 1991. Compagno was also an active member of several scientific expeditions, collecting fundamental data on various marine ecosystems and shark habitats. In addition to taxonomy, he also explored species' migratory behaviours, feeding, growth and interactions with other marine species. His extensive work has provided foundational ecological understanding that will continue to inform policies for the sustainable management of marine resources.

Even so, there was much more to Compagno than being a scientist. Leonard was a remarkably unique character who had the kindest of hearts, an exceptionally generous spirit, and a quick and clever sense of humour. He loved philosophical debates and was thought of as a walking encyclopaedia of sorts; he had a sharp capacity to see through world agendas and created his own funny idioms. Those closest to him endearingly referred to him as 'Lenny the Tiger, because—after sharks—tigers were his second love. His social uniqueness and idiosyncratic ways made so many people laugh and feel great about themselves. He was also a gifted sculptor, artist and photographer, and a creative writer with a lateral imagination who wrote several science fiction books, countless short stories and essays. Compagno was personally fond of Italy, *Star Trek* and *Avatar*; owing to his Italian roots and inexhaustible scientific curiosity, he congenially liked to think of himself as a possible descendant of Leonardo Da Vinci!

Leonard J.V. Compagno dedicated his life to the study of sharks, skates and rays, and to ensuring their protection. Thanks to his wide-ranging work, we have a deeper understanding of chondrichthyan biodiversity and the need to conserve this vulnerable group of fishes for the wellbeing of our oceans and the global ecosystem. His legacy goes beyond a static list of academic works and achievements, as his sheer passion for the sea and the world of chondrichthyans leave an indelible mark on the scientific community and will inspire generations to come.

## ORCID

Primo Micarelli: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0582-3770>

Frederik H. Mollen: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9934-1029>

Jürgen Pollerspöck: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5558-0987>

Francesca Reinero: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8400-1227>

Emilio Sperone: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3180-7611>