

## Conrad Gorinsky (1936-2019)

It is with great sadness that we learnt of the passing of Conrad Gorinsky, in August. Conrad was an extraordinary individual whose wild imagination, boundless energy, contagious optimism and astounding foresight, creativity and 'out-of-the-box', broad, original ideas and actions stand out today at once as highly prescient and ahead of their time, yet also largely unknown and under-appreciated.

While the obituaries in [The Times](#) or [The Guardian](#) provide us with a patchwork of insights into his unique origins, life, and career, what I wish to highlight and acknowledge here is Conrad's signal contribution to the history of the Explorer's Inn and the Tambopata Reserve and the people, projects and ideas that cascaded out from there in the mid-1980's.

I was introduced to Conrad in 1984 by Kevin Morgan who, having returned from a stint as a Resident Naturalist at the Explorer's Inn, had convinced Conrad to partner with the newly founded international venture Operation Raleigh and Max Gunther to offer his logistical support for the whole venture. The idea was to use young Operation Raleigh volunteers from around the world to spearhead Conrad's idea- unique in its day- of establishing a network of interconnected ethnobiological databases in the global south that could be used to support sustainable development projects by drawing on the rich knowledge of what he called 'barefoot professors'. Explorer's Inn was to be the base from which to pilot the approach.

The reason I remember this meeting so well, thirty-five years later, has as much to do with Conrad and the particulars of his unique appearance and personality, as to the smaller and larger context in which the meeting and the events that followed unfolded. Conrad's striking appearance - tall and lanky, with an easy, mischievous grin and sparkle in his eye - was an appropriate stage for an equally striking personality. His congenial, warm, open and informal demeanour, his gently self-deprecating humour and sardonic wit, his relentless optimism and child-like wonder and enthusiasm, these things were all deeply contagious and inspiring to a young man as myself just out of University and rearing to step into the world. His style and manner seemed wonderfully out of place in the plush settings of the newly created Earthlife Foundation offices in Belgrave Square, central London. The kind of corporate formality, order and self-importance exuded by the surroundings he found himself in were things which he despised and ridiculed, but felt he had to live with for reasons larger than him or the institution. The larger context of Earthlife, Bioresources- the company he had helped to set up within the Earthlife Foundation- as well as Conrad's own ideas are worth describing briefly as a way of setting the grander stage in which his life and career unfolded in those years.

By the 1980's both conservation and economic development were in a state of deep crisis, globally. The period of post-war modernisation and the Green Revolution had generated an explosive growth in the production and consumption of food and consumer goods, but also led to huge social and environmental problems linked to mass displacement, hyper-urbanisation, and a

wholesale degradation of the world's resources and life-support systems. These factors, coupled with an international financial and debt crisis and the consequent structural reforms associated with the rise of neoliberal economics led to, among other things, the emergence of a new paradigm- sustainable development- with its attempt bring together what until then had been framed as irreconcilable projects- conservation and economic development- and forms of institutional organisation- charities and businesses.

Looking back today, I am struck by how prescient Conrad was in his estimation that indigenous knowledge and the new digital technologies had a critically important role to play in developing new modalities of economic development that were socially and environmentally generative, and how the models championed by Bioresources and Earthlife became part of the orthodoxy in the years that followed. Like others after him, he probably also miscalculated the political complications and disputes that would arise from enabling those connections amid the historical grievances, inequalities and contradictions of our increasingly networked yet highly fragmented world.

I will never forget the day he brought an Osborne 1 - the world's first commercial 'portable' computer (weighing over 10 kg and the size of a small suitcase) to Puerto Maldonado in 1985 and attempted to demonstrate what at the time seemed like science fiction: the transfer of data from a field computer (the first ever in Puerto Maldonado, to my knowledge) to a central database, using a phone system that still relied on antiquated and quite ineffective manually-operated switchboards. The memory of Conrad, gesticulating and enthusiastically expounding in his Portuguese-Spanish-English pidgin his prophecy of a world to be, to a rather baffled, unreceptive- even suspicious- audience, is one that captures something important about the person, the place and the moment.

My time working with Conrad was very short - I worked as a volunteer and then consultant for him and for Bioresources between 1985 to 1987, at which point the Earthlife Foundation collapsed and the project was temporarily adopted by WWF-UK. But the work that we began with AMETRA (Aplicación de Medicina Tradicional), through the original impulse and support from Conrad and Bioresources, grew and blossomed into a well-established and profoundly influential series of projects and processes, each with its own domino-effect of profound transformations and developments: the AMETRA 2001 organisation; the construction of the Ñape centre in Infierno; the early consolidation of the regional indigenous federation, FENAMAD and TReeS; as well as my own career and those of other peers and colleagues, but also, more generally, contributed to the emergence of Explorers Inn and the Tambopata Reserved Zone as a hotspot of innovative science and conservation.

Conrad once remarked that he believed there to be two major theories about the world; the 'conspiracy theory' and the 'cock-up theory'. He believed that the fateful end met by many human endeavours and aspirations is not so much due to Machiavellian malice as to the more mundane workings of incompetence, mediocrity and stupidity. In retrospect, it is remarkable to see how many of the ideas championed by Conrad - controversial at the time - were gradually

appropriated by some of the very people and institutions who first criticized them. His greatest accomplishments and disappointments - and there were several big ones that injured him deeply - do seem to bear witness in no small part to the genius and hubris of big, brave, new ideas. It is, however, some of the other sides of his humanity - his generosity, curiosity, intelligence and humour - that I miss the most.

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