

## ON NAVJOT S. SODHI 1962–2011

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Navjot S. Sodhi was born on 18 Mar.1962 in Nabha, India. He went to Panjab University for his Bachelor and Master's degrees in Zoology. In 1991, he received his doctorate in Biology from the University of Saskatchewan, Canada, where he was trained as a field ornithologist. Navjot spent the following four years as a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Alberta and then the National Institute for Environmental Studies, Japan. In 1995, Navjot was appointed Assistant Professor at the Department of Biological Sciences, National University of Singapore (NUS). He received his academic tenure (Associate Professor) in 2001, and became Professor of Conservation Ecology in 2007.

Navjot was particularly drawn to Harvard University, which he felt was unequivocally the "best University in the world". He was at Harvard as Charles Bullard Fellow in 2002, and as Sarah and Daniel Hardy Fellow in Conservation Biology in 2008–2009. On several occasions of self reflection, Navjot remarked to us that the first sabbatical was a turning point in his conservation career. He returned a more optimistic and purposeful conservation scientist, determined to make a difference to the teaching and practice of conservation in the tropics.

We got to know Navjot personally when we joined the then Conservation and Behavioural Ecology Lab about 12 years ago. Lian Pin was just starting his Honours research in the fourth year of his bachelor programme; Tien Ming was supervised by Navjot under the university's Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme in Science (UROPS). We eventually stayed on through our Master's research. There was never any doubt that Navjot would have to be our project supervisor. Dressed in his baseball cap (worn backwards), t-shirt, bermudas, and sandals, Navjot was easily the coolest and hippest Professor we knew.

Navjot's mentoring style was just as unique. He never expected his students to show up in his lab, although the lab

was always busy. In fact, he once told us that he didn't care if students danced naked as long as they got the job done. We think we became quite good at one of those two things, thanks to Navjot. A typical day in the Sodhi lab would begin with him and his students having coffee or tea in a sofa corner. (Instant pre-mix coffee was his favourite.) The daily gossip perked everyone up much more effectively than any caffeinated beverage. As our conversations would switch effortlessly between gossip and serious work, we would scribble ideas, equations, and graphs on the whiteboard. Several of those doodles eventually led to important publications in top scientific journals, with important impacts on conservation science. Sometimes our conversations would drift towards the more philosophical. When asked what he would like to have accomplished in his lifetime as a scientist, Navjot replied that science progresses in small steps, to which he hoped to contribute a little.

In fact, through his many students and vast network of collaborators, Navjot made huge strides in advancing conservation science. (Incidentally, one often sees multiple co-authors in Navjot's publications, which he believed, is how science should be done—collaboratively.) Over the past several years, he had been studying the effects of human activities on forest biodiversity in Southeast Asia. With his students and collaborators, Navjot collected valuable empirical data from numerous field sites, spanning the lowlands to the highlands, and across diverse land uses. Through these projects, Navjot led a major effort in demonstrating that across the tropics primary forests are irreplaceable for biodiversity conservation (a posthumous paper in *Nature*, 478: 378–381). Navjot was also interested in the processes underlying extinctions of tropical species. In a study that eventually led to a landmark publication (*Nature*, 424: 420–423), he provided compelling evidence linking species extinctions to deforestation in Singapore.

Navjot's most significant contribution to conservation, however, is a book that he co-edited with Paul Ehrlich of

Stanford University. “*Conservation Biology for All*” is a compilation of articles written by leading ecologists with the goal of communicating the best conservation science as widely as possible. Navjot had insisted to the book publisher that a copy be made freely available on the web. This has undoubtedly benefited countless students, teachers, resource managers, and budding conservationists in the developing tropics who would otherwise not have access to a book of such importance.

In his career, Navjot published more than 100 scientific papers in international peer-reviewed journals, many of which are highly respected and cited by colleagues. He was an editor and/or board member of almost all the major conservation journals, including *Biological Conservation* (2008–2011), *Conservation Biology* (2003–2010), *Animal Conservation* (2006–2010), *Environmental Conservation* (2011), *Biodiversity and Conservation* (2011), *Auk* (2003–2007), *Biotropica* (2006–2008), and the *Raffles Bulletin of Zoology* (1996–2011). Navjot had written and edited six books, despite repeatedly saying that each was his last. With the help of colleagues and students, he was still working on two books and numerous manuscripts from his hospital bed. Notably, Navjot’s upcoming book, “*Conservation Biology: Lessons from the Tropics*”, which he was co-editing with Peter Raven of Missouri Botanical Gardens, will be another major contribution to practical conservation.

Navjot supervised 17 graduate students and the same number of undergraduate research projects in his career. Many of his former students have gone on to successful careers in conservation. We continued to collaborate with Navjot even after we had left his lab several years ago. And Navjot continued to advise and support our careers, no different than how a father would ceaselessly care for his children. Navjot was extremely generous and forgiving to all his students, and never expected anything in return.

When Navjot visited Yale University in Feb.2011, Tien Ming met him for the final time. They parted ways with grand and exciting research plans. Lian Pin last saw Navjot in Singapore, Apr.2011. Physically Navjot had become a poor shadow of his former self; but mentally he was still as sharp as ever. They also made great plans to work more closely together when he got better.

We are extremely proud to have Navjot as our academic father. We are even prouder to have had him as a dear friend. The world lost a great scientist on 12 Jun.2011, and we miss him tremendously. We have no doubt that Navjot’s legacy will continue to inspire future generations of conservation scientists. Our sincerest condolences to Navjot’s family—Bubblee, Ada, and Darwin.

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