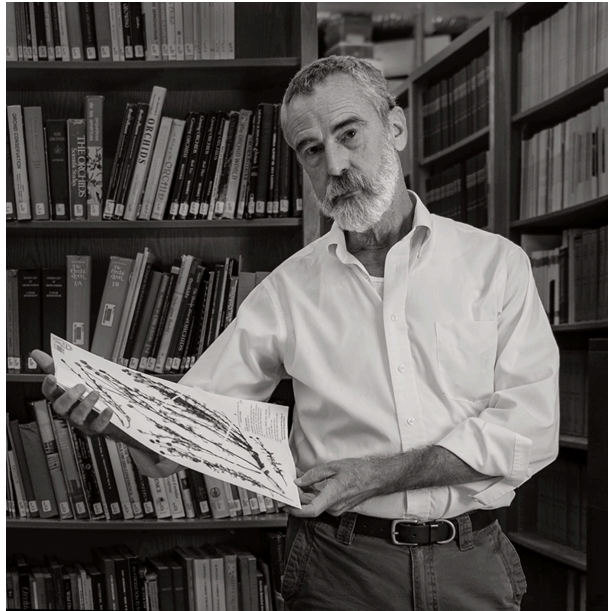


OBITUARY

WILLIAM MARK WHITTEN (1954–2019)



Florida Museum of Natural History. Photo by Kristen Grace.

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On April 11, 2019, Dr. William Mark Whitten, a prolific neotropical orchid biologist passed away unexpectedly. He leaves an extensive corpus of work focused on (but not limited to) orchid pollination and systematics, and over four thousand beautifully prepared herbarium specimens. Everyone that met Mark can agree that he was a wonderful human being, kind to everyone, incredibly knowledgeable and yet very humble. Always of a calm demeanor, great sense of humor, and willingness to help, Mark

was an outstanding and relatable collaborator, and his publications (more than a hundred; see list below) are evidence of a productive and highly collaborative academic career.

Mark was born on October 20, 1954, in Memphis, Tennessee. His early education included Bishop Byrne High School in Memphis, where he graduated in 1972, and the Thomas More College in Crestview Hills, Kentucky, where he obtained a bachelor's degree in Biology in 1976. During college, he worked for various



Mark Whitten at Mary Selby Botanical Gardens greenhouse with living orchid research collection, 1982. Photographer unknown.

environmental consulting firms on the phytoplankton of the Ohio River. He pursued his graduate education and in 1979, he obtained his Master's degree in Botany from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, with a thesis titled "Pollination ecology of *Monarda didyma*, *M. clinopodia* and hybrids (Lamiaceae) in the southern Appalachian Mountains", which, two years later, became his first publication.

In the same year Mark graduated from his Master's program, he started his doctoral degree at Florida State University in Tallahassee under the direction of Norris H. Williams. His research was centered on the pollination of orchids by euglossine bees. In 1981, Mark moved with the 'Williams Lab' to the Florida Museum of Natural History at the University of Florida in Gainesville. During this period, Mark also received the guidance of Robert L. Dressler (then at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama) and Calaway H. Dodson (then Executive Director of the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens in Sarasota, Florida). He spent the summer of 1981 as an intern at the Orchid Identification Center at the Marie



Mark Whitten in paramo El Angel, Carchi, Ecuador, holding an inflorescence of *Puya hamata* (Bromeliaceae) and *Espeletia pycnophylla* ssp. *angelensis* (Asteraceae) in the background, late 1980's. Photo: Mark Elliott.

Selby Botanical Gardens. In 1985 he defended his dissertation, titled "Variation in floral fragrances and pollinators in the *Gongora quinquenervis* complex (Orchidaceae) in central Panama".

For his dissertation, Mark learned techniques of gas chromatography and mass spectrometry for the isolation and identification of the chemical compounds produced by flowers of *Gongora* and other orchid genera, responsible for the attraction of their euglossine bee pollinators. He became part of a small group of orchid researchers (including Dressler, Dodson, Williams and James Ackerman) that made substantial contributions to the understanding of the biology of orchid bees. During this period, Mark collected a substantial amount of bee specimens and gathered data and observations that he later shared and published in collaboration with other orchid bee experts. Some interesting anecdotes of Mark's research during this period are presented in Allen Young's book "Sarapiquí Chronicle: A Naturalist in Costa Rica" (1991. Smithsonian Institution Press).



Mark Whitten in the lava flows of Paramo de La Virgen, Napo, Ecuador in 2009. Photographer unknown.



Mark Whitten at Ordway-Swisher Biological Station in Florida, 2014, holding *Toxicodendron radicans* (Anacardiaceae). Photo: Kurt Neubig

After obtaining his Ph.D., Mark continued working at the Florida Museum of Natural History, initially as a postdoctoral research associate and later as Senior Biological Scientist. He expanded his professional skills by learning molecular systematic techniques and phylogenetics with Mark W. Chase (first in 1990 at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, and later in 1994 at the Jodrell Laboratory of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew). Mark Whitten, Mark Chase and Norris Williams collaborated for many years thereafter, assembling phylogenies for a variety of orchid groups. Mark described or co-described several orchid species in the genera *Basiphyllaea* (1 sp.), *Gongora* (5 spp.), *Ornithidium* (1 sp.), *Solenidium* (1 sp.) and *Stanhopea* (1 sp.), and also one species of *Pitcairnia* (Bromeliaceae). He also co-described two orchid genera (*Brasilocycnis* G. Gerlach & Whitten and *Nohawilliamsia* M.W. Chase & Whitten) and one subgenus (*Houlletia* subgen. *Neohoulletia* G. Gerlach & Whitten). He also authored and co-authored numerous generic transfers. Mark discovered or documented many other new orchid species and genera, but frequently gave them

to other specialists or students for their description and publication. Four orchid species are named after him: *Epidendrum whittenii* Hágsater & Dodson, *Lepanthes whittenii* Pupulin & Bogarín, *Maxillaria whittenii* Dodson and *Stanhopea whittenii* Soto-Arenas, Salazar & G. Gerlach.

For most of his time in the Florida Museum of Natural History, Mark was in charge of the Molecular Lab associated with the University of Florida Herbarium (FLAS), a position he held until 2015. In that year, he became a member of the Scientific Committee of *Lankesteriana*, the academic journal of the Lankester Botanical Garden. In 2013, he and collaborators began a floristic inventory and DNA barcoding of the Ordway-Swisher Biological Station in Putnam County, Florida, which he continued until his death. In most recent years, Mark collaborated with Pam and Doug Soltis in a variety of projects, including their US-China Dimensions of Biodiversity project, experimenting with isolation methods for high molecular weight DNA suitable for genome sequencing, gulf coast biodiversity hotspot studies, etc.

Mark was a great mentor for numerous students from the University of Florida, and other institutions alike. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of natural history and he shared it with students and colleagues in a very constructive and encouraging manner. Mark cared deeply for students' academic progress as well as their personal well-being. He was especially generous with international students; he would take time and care in helping them navigate through differences in culture, all while maintaining a sense of humor that made them feel right at home. Mark was fully aware of the challenges faced in academia by students, and he set a high standard of integrity, honesty, and generosity that we all should emulate.

As a group of his former students, we in particular owe Mark a great deal for his help in our academic development and for our career success. He liked to turn a phrase in Latin, and this one meant a lot to him: “*Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est.*”

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