Ken Miyata: Some Remembrances

B Wu and Eric Larson

Ken’s death in October 1983 left a gaping hole in three intersecting worlds and touched people everywhere who counted him as a good friend and marveled at his mastery, his kindness and his sense of humor. Ken was amazingly accomplished - he was a brilliant scientist, a superb photographer, a fly-fisherman non-pareil. In his thirty-three years, Ken mastered – truly mastered – at least three professional fields. As a graduate student with extremely limited means, Ken’s photographs helped pay some of his bills; his science inspired him, and those around him; his fly-fishing was a sanctuary where he achieved international renown at a young age and remains a legend to this day.

Had he lived longer, it is almost certain that Ken would have emerged as an important global leader in one or more of these fields. He died doing one of things he loved most – fishing for big trout in his beloved rivers of the northern Rockies. His end-of-a-too-short-life story is a kind of tragedy – one last fishing trip to Montana and Idaho before beginning a Nature Conservancy job in Washington DC. TNC hired Ken to inventory ecologically important land in Central and South America, a position for which he was uniquely qualified, and excited to take on (though he was concerned that a regular job might cut into his fishing time). He had so
much to offer, a remarkable life ahead of him, and then suddenly he was gone. As they say in the Old West, he died with his boots on. In Ken’s case, they were fishing boots.

His loss saddens us still. In the past thirty years, we have yet to meet someone who is as broadly accomplished as Ken. Having spent this time trying to establish our own careers, we are struck today by how much Ken accomplished in his short life. We knew then that he was amazing. With the passage of time, we realize how unusual Ken Miyata really was. He had a serenity and inner peace that comes with a sense of knowing who you are.

Growing up on the east side of Los Angeles, Ken packed an enormous amount of knowledge and understanding about the natural world into his short life. How did he do it? He was, first and foremost, an explorer. Ken began his naturalist's education traversing the San Gabriel Mountains behind his home. Summer visits to his aunt and uncle’s farm in Idaho while in grade school fueled a passion for fishing, a passion that never stopped growing. We are not sure where the photography came from, but his camera accompanied him on every scientific and fishing journey. He had an artistic eye and a deep appreciation for nature’s beauty — from the intricate structures and colors of rainforest frogs and the glistening hues of his trout quarry — and captured these images on film. He knew he was talented, but he was never arrogant about it.

The re-publishing of part of Ken’s thesis (along with Tropical Nature) enables his scientific contributions to be recognized. But it is the stories that Ken’s friends hold dear that allow our memory of him to live on. We have a few to share.

Fishing — the two of us learned virtually everything we know about fly fishing from Ken. We were Ken’s fishing companions all over the East Coast: near Boston (a Walden Pond story follows), Cape Cod, middle Massachusetts, the Berkshires, the Battenkill in Vermont and the Catskills in New York as well as the big rivers in Montana, Wyoming and Idaho. That we were novices when we started fishing with Ken didn’t bother him. He was non-judgmental, and offered helpful, if sparse, advice. Watching him fish was the best tutorial, like watching Ted Williams hit a baseball; his method was scientific and precise. Where others simply
flailed their fly lines onto the water, every one of Ken’s casts had a purpose. One summer evening, while fishing on the Townsend River west of Boston, everyone else with a fishing rod got out of the river to watch the master in action. On another summer evening, we were fishing from the pier at Walden Pond, Ken’s long, elegant casts stretching far out into the pond. The pier and the nearby beach were crowded with swimmers. Ken’s casts landed in the water far from where they were swimming, but his backcasts zipped near the heads of people on the pier. A concerned and angry pier dweller (and parent) stomped to the end of the pier to tell Ken that his fly line (and the hook attached to the end of it) was coming dangerously close to him and his family. Without even turning to acknowledge the fellow’s presence, Ken calmly responded, “No, the fly is five feet away from you” and kept casting. He didn’t say, “...and it won’t hit you”, but his confident demeanor and precise, repetitive motions did. An avid reader on many topics, Ken had a lengthy reading list for any aspiring fly fisherman. According to Ken, every book, every author - even those that had little to distinguish themselves - offered at least one nugget of fishing treasure. I have carried this lesson beyond the stream; to search for the useful nugget in everything that is written. Ken’s own writings on fishing were superb. His “Anting the Hatch” article in *Fly Fisherman* magazine was, as they say in the sports world, an instant classic. It resonated with expert fly fisherman who had studied Ernest Schwiebert’s treatise *Matching the Hatch*, and is as relevant today as it was when it was first published. As both a fisherman and a biologist, Ken understood that ants offer a nutritional content that can be superior to that of the flies (mayflies, caddis, etc.) that trout regularly consume. Ken recommended – with amply demonstrated and duly recorded success – that floating an ant through a pod of fish feeding on a hatch of mayflies produced lively results. Lastly, I fished with Ken and several of his famous pals in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Never, not once, did I feel like an accomplished fly fisherman when I was in his presence. At one point, though, as we were riding to a stream in Ken’s old Chevy, he commented to me quietly, “you may not realize it, but you have become a very good fisherman.” He was right. I did not realize it, because I was comparing myself to all the things that he did – that I could not do then and to this day am still unable to do – as a fisherman.

**Style** – Ken’s life of simplicity was bounded and constrained by relatively meager funds. He had modest means and accepted that modesty. (That doesn’t mean he didn’t complain about it). But he lived well within his means and his simplicity was very stylish. It was a style that Ralph Lauren and Indiana Jones later replicated; blue jean casual, with a work shirt. Without even trying, Ken’s adventurous outdoor life was stylish by nature. His ‘steed’ was also stylish - a white 1963/1964 Chevrolet Impala. It was well into its second decade when we knew him, yet, since it was from California, it didn’t have a speck of rust and he maintained it well. He had to - that car was Ken’s only means of travel to fishing destinations throughout the east and to the Rockies. (At one point, it was stolen from in front of his Cambridge apartment and turned into the quintessential low-rider vehicle. When it was recovered a few months later, the
interior had been decorated and lit in low-rider fashion, but was no worse for the wear. Ken admired and kept the design ‘upgrades’). His modesty had two exceptions, though – his two expensive habits, photography and fly-fishing. He spared no expense to have the finest equipment and the latest technology for his passions. These were his luxuries, and he was familiar with the finest that his hobbies offered.

Loving adoration – Ken met a kindred spirit in the form of our aloof and beautiful English Setter, Keever. At first she was merely his decoy for attracting women in Harvard Yard (she was far better at this than any hare-brained ideas offered by his fellow graduate students!). Later, he was impressed by her powers of attention and stillness. Ken could see Keever through his office window as she spent hours observing wildlife in and around the yew in the MCZ courtyard. Long before we were invited, Keever accompanied Ken on many fishing expeditions. Just the two of them out exploring and taking notes; both oblivious to hunger and weather. Her adoration and belief in him was complete. Once, on the Madison in Montana, her curiosity got her caught in a swift current. Instead of panicking and swimming against the current, her eyes followed Ken as he ran along the banks. She allowed herself to be carried downstream to calmer waters where Ken awaited.

Technology – Ken was at the leading edge of the personal computer revolution. It is still unclear how he knew so much about computers at that relatively early stage, but he viewed them as valuable tools for both scientific research and recordkeeping for his fly fishing outings. He recorded details of every fish he caught (river, position on the stream, time of day, conditions, type of fly, variety and size of the fish, etc.) in a notebook he carried on-stream. After catching and releasing a fish (often taking a photograph in between the catch and the release), Ken would retrieve his notebook from his fishing vest, enter his notes, and then later transfer them to a database he kept on his personal computer. His records must be extraordinary, because he caught fish prolifically and, each time, took a few moments to record the results. His discipline was well-suited to the computer era that followed. His technology demands exceeded the current product offering…or, perhaps, his capacity to pay for the latest products. At a time when most reports were still done on a typewriter, Ken wrote his graduate thesis on an early word processing program. He did not have – or could not afford – a printer to produce the output. So he improvised one, using an IBM Selectrix typewriter jury-rigged to read the print code from the computer. Compared to today’s printers, it was primitive. But it was fast and accurate, just the tool for Ken’s monumental thesis.

One final fishing story from Eric. Although it sounds like a ‘fish story,’ it is true. After Ken died, The Nature Conservancy placed a plaque in his honor on the banks of its famous Silver Creek Preserve near Ketchum, Idaho. It is a shrine that attracts fly fishing cognoscenti, positioned on a bank of the Sullivan’s Slough portion of the Preserve. Large, torpedo-sized
trout patrol the waters; they are visible from the approach drive high above the Creek as you enter the Preserve. It looks like heaven for trout, and Ken would be right at home here. When we finally got back to Idaho in mid-1990s, we were intent to visit this memorial. Checking in at the gatehouse for the Silver Creek Preserve, the conservationist – an avid Miyata fan – offered to walk us down to the memorial site. I had my fly rod along, though he advised not to bother even trying to catch the fish in Sullivan’s Slough. “You won’t catch one. No one does. They are impossible to catch.” Our guide lingered with us at the memorial, then despite his admonition, I waded into the still waters of the Slough. Not wishing to see me either humiliated or waste my time (or his), the guide headed back toward the gatehouse. After a few casts, one of those immense fish – perhaps Ken himself reincarnated as a gigantic rainbow trout – sipped my tiny fly. The line screamed off my reel as the fish tore across the pond, leaping acrobatically. The guide heard the unmistakable sound of a big fish tearing line off a reel and sprinted back to watch me land my huge quarry. “Hello, Ken”, I thought. It was, without a doubt, the most remarkable experience in my life as a fly fisherman. I caught my breath and found a new position to try my luck again. Ten minutes later, I caught another. Those are the only two fish I have ever caught at Sullivan’s Slough, and I believe they had Ken’s blessing to show me a good time in the Slough.

It was an honor to know Ken. Like James Dean, Janis Joplin and other superstars, he died much too young. Yet he left an indelible mark in the memories of his friends and a legacy that doesn’t quit.

In loving memory,

B Wu and Eric Larson

Greg Mayer

I first met Ken Miyata in the fall of 1979, when I arrived at the Museum of Comparative Zoology to begin graduate school. Ken, as the senior grad student, had the largest space within the shared grad student/post doc office. Ken’s space had a huge antique wooden bookcase stocked with marvels of herpetological literature that a beginning grad student could only have imagined, a slide sorter arrayed with Ken’s beautiful Kodachromes, and a Selectric typewriter.

As I quickly got to know Ken, I realized he was a supremely impressive person: a naturalist, a scientist, a writer, a photographic artist, and even a fly fisherman. I imbibed everything I could about him—what he read, how he organized his work, how he took photos; for a new grad student, Ken was a shining example. I immediately signed up for, and turned out to be the only student in, a class Ken offered in nature photography, and I purchased my first
camera kit (for use in my first tropical foray, to Costa Rica) following Ken’s directions. When I returned from my first West Indian field trip, which was led by Ernest Williams, Ken told me, “Good. Now you know how not to do field work!”

We shared that office for a couple of years, while Ken finished his thesis (which turned out to be a very healthy 8 lbs., 13 oz., as we weighed it in the MCZ mailroom) and afterwards until he left for his USNM post doc with Roy McDiarmid at the Smithsonian. Ken was an early adopter of technology, and was the first person I knew to have his own personal computer, which he kept in the office. But this came after he finished his thesis, and he carried out much of the sophisticated statistical analyses that went into his thesis chapter on herpetological species richness, including path analyses and multiple regressions, on my programmable TI SR-51A calculator.

Ken was a great fan of country music. At the time he was finishing his Ph.D. thesis, it just so happened that one of his favorites, Emmylou Harris, was making an appearance at the Harvard Coop (which had at the time a large music department). Ken went down and got his thesis signed by her, making his Ph.D. thesis one of the few Harvard theses signed by a distinguished committee of academic examiners and by a country music star.

After he finished his degree, Ken hung around for a few months, working at a bookstore and fishing. To maximize the success of his fishing, he kept careful records, including which lures he used and how successful they were. He was living largely off the fish he caught, ramen noodles, and, oddly, McDonald’s hamburgers. It seems a contradiction, but for fishing trips, Ken kept maps of New England which had the locations of McDonald’s marked on them to help plan his itinerary. He always extolled the virtues of what he called “Vitamin G”: grease.

In time, Ken left for Washington, and I was able to expand slightly my sliver of the office, and to turn around his great bookcase and make it part of my space. We last spent substantial time together in 1982. Ken was living with his aunt and uncle in D.C., and my wife Nan and I had driven down to do some sightseeing. Nan flew back to Cambridge, and Ken and I drove down to the herp meetings in Raleigh, North Carolina. After the meetings were over, Ken and I drove into the mountains near Asheville, where we met Troy, one of Ken’s fishing buddies whom he had met out West. While they fished the trout streams, I put to use the photography skills Ken had taught me, paying especial attention to the Desmognathus salamanders that lurked in and near the streams.

When Ken went missing in the fall of 1983 while on a wilderness fishing trip, we consoled ourselves with our knowledge of his great skill in the field—a true maitre bois, in the Creole phrase. He might be hurt, but he knew how to take care of himself, and would hole up to await searchers, or make his way out. But it was not to be. Some months later, Ken’s friends
from both his worlds gathered for a memorial in Washington, D.C., many of us staying at Jerry Coyne’s house in Maryland. Although I had long known of Ken’s passion for fishing, it was only at the memorial, attended by fly fishermen from around the country, that I realized how well known, respected, and beloved Ken was in the fraternity of truly serious fishermen.

Even after his passing, Ken had the ability to inspire. A few years later, Pere Alberch (another friend and colleague lost too soon) was teaching the herpetology course in the Herp (now E.E. Williams) Library. One of the students, Joe Walsh, an economics concentrator and football player, although professing a love of herps, seemed out of place. He picked a volume off one of the shelves—it was a binder of Ken’s field notes. He read, and finally asked, “Are these notes by the Ken Miyata; you know, the famous fisherman?” Yes—Ken Miyata the fisherman was also Ken Miyata the herpetologist. It changed Joe’s life. He began doing research, worked with me in the field in the Virgin Islands, got his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago, and now is in Biological Sciences at Northwestern University.

Two summers after his death, Skip Lazell and I sat at the bar (there was only one) on Anegada in the British Virgin Islands, and toasted Ken’s life and accomplishments. His friends, science, and the world were all enriched by what Ken did in his short life, and it makes his fate that much more bitter, and that much more sad to us who remain, to think about how much more he would have done.

Jerry Coyne

My best friend in graduate school at Harvard’s Museum of Comparative Zoology, Ken Miyata was a polymath (Lambert, 2000): a superb natural historian and biologist, a great writer (he wrote, along with Adrian Forsyth, the volume Tropical Nature that contains the story of the Costa Rican botfly that burrowed into my head and came back with me to Cambridge, as well as many other engrossing tales about the tropics); a fantastic photographer, and a world-class fly fisherman. He was a wonderful friend, always full of new ideas about biology and schemes about how to find a girlfriend and how to fish while getting a Ph.D. at the same time. He had a penchant for greasy food (he taught me to make the quintessential grad-student dinner: roast chicken with rice, the latter mixed with chicken grease and mayonnaise) and was fascinated by the bizarre and outlandish aspects of life.

When Ken died in a fishing accident in 1983, the victim of a fast current on Idaho’s Snake River, his life had just taken a dramatic turn for the better: he found a lovely girlfriend and had secured his dream job with a conservation organization. To celebrate, he went out West for one more fishing trip before starting his new life in Washington, D.C. They found his
body three days after he went missing, enshrouded in the fishing line that had coiled around him.

During our years at Harvard, I occasionally loaned Ken some dosh to tide him over the lean times, and he promised in return that one day he’d name a species of frog after me. And so it came to pass: my beautiful frog (chocolate brown with bright green splotches) was named and formally described by Ken in 1980 as *Atelopus coynei*. The hundred-odd species of the frog genus *Atelopus*, found in Central and South America, are called “harlequin frogs” because of their bright, parti-colored pattern. They’re in the family Bufonidae, so they’re formally toads.

Like me, the frog (and many other species in its genus) is on the way out. Soon after its discovery *Atelopus coynei* was thought to have become extinct. These beautiful creatures (I include Ken in that category), are denizens of the wet forests of western Ecuador, which are being lost to human depredation at an alarming rate. Too, frogs throughout the world worldwide are being decimated by a chytrid fungus. *A. coynei* was not seen after 1984, but, on, February 7, 2012, an individual was found at Chinambi, Carchi, Ecuador. I feel a metaphor here: the frog, like the memory of my erstwhile best friend, stays with us tenaciously.


Ray Huey

Ken Miyata had many fine attributes, but the one of the things Ken did that really impressed me occurred just as he was finishing his Ph.D. thesis at Harvard. Linda Ronstadt was in Boston for a concert. Ken, who was a fan, went to her concert. Amazingly, he somehow talked his way back stage and persuaded Ronstadt to autograph his Ph.D. thesis. Few people could have pulled that off -- that Ken could do so says a lot about his boldness and his charm. It wasn't just trout and lizards that he could charm.

Editor’s Note: Editor's Note: Ken was fond of both Linda Ronstadt and Emmy Lou Harris. We'll need to find the original copy of his thesis to find out if these are two versions of the same story or if, in fact, his thesis was multiply signed!"
Chuck Crumly

I was a fellow at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History with Ken and I have often thought of him and marveled at how much he accomplished in such a short life. Ken had charisma and an infectious joy of life. He built his own computer—a TRS 80 kit from Radio Shack (there must be an example of this monster in the Smithsonian somewhere). He tied flies for a legendary fishing career. When people heard he was on the river, they would come and watch him cast. He was a good cook according to his roommate George Middendorf. His photographic skills were unparalleled; he could have gone pro. He had a Galápagos tortoise shell discarded from a well-known museum in his apartment—I was incredibly envious. Everything seemed to come easily to him. He was funny, generous of spirit, and brilliant. He very patiently described path analysis to me and I am still not sure how it works. He never made me feel slow or dim-witted, but he easily could have. Whenever I came into the Museum, I looked forward to seeing Ken—everyone did. Lunch included more laughing and better stories when Ken joined in. When he died so tragically, and ironically, doing something he loved and excelled at, I had dreams of him coming in out of blue and regaling us all with stories of his field exploits. He had been to wonderful places and had spectacular pictures. His world bubbled with excitement, percolated with discovery, and, alas, evaporated prematurely. To this day, I sometimes dream of turning a corner in a museum somewhere and finding Ken hunched over a specimen; he looks up and smiles, as if the three decades since he has been gone passed by as swiftly as the rapids that swept him under.