

Obituary: RUDOLPH CARL BIGALKE

By Roy Siegfried

Rudolph Carl Bigalke was born at Kimberley, in South Africa, on 24 February 1932. His parents were from German and English stock, and he grew up proficient in both languages. His friends called him Rudi and his relatives called him Carl. As a child, and subsequently, reading was one of his passions. He enjoyed classical music, good red wine, stimulating conversation, fly fishing, farming and hunting. He loved his professional work.

He studied at Rhodes University where he obtained his Honours degree in zoology and a diploma in education. Thereafter, Bigalke was awarded the degree of Dr Phil. Nat by the J.W. Goethe University at Frankfurt am Main in Germany. The supervisor of his thesis work was Gustav Kramer. Kramer was the first person to demonstrate experimentally that migratory birds use the sun and the stars while navigating.

On his return to Africa, Bigalke was appointed as the first biologist in the then Etosha Game Park, in what was then South West Africa. This was in 1956. During a once-a-month trip to Windhoek, to obtain groceries and other items, he met his future partner. He shared a life-long loving relationship with Inge. They had two sons, Michael and Martin. Michael became a veterinarian, and Martin is a urologist. Michael lost his life accidentally while cleaning a gun.

In 1958, Bigalke moved to Kimberley. He remained there for six years as the director of the McGregor Memorial Museum. It was a time when the museum was a part of the administration of the old Cape Province. This arrangement brought together Bigalke and Douglas Hey who was the first director of nature conservation in the Cape. For many years Bigalke was a member of Hey's advisory committee for nature conservation in the Cape Province. Bigalke's views did not always agree with those of Hey, but he never allowed such differences to become petty or mean. He was a big man in more ways than one. Nevertheless, it was time for Bigalke to move on. In 1964, he moved to Pietermaritzburg as the principal research officer for the then Natal Parks, Game and Fish Preservation Board.

It was in Natal that Bigalke developed his interest in fly-fishing, while under the influence of Robert (Bob) Crass. This subsequently led to the Bigalkes becoming the owners of a holiday cottage in the village of Rhodes. Bigalke was in his element in the cool air of Rhodes where he loved the walking, riding, swimming and fly-fishing. He was a founding patron of the Federation of South African Fly Fishers.

Bigalke was also part of the foundation of the Department of Nature Conservation in the then Faculty of Forestry at the University of Stellenbosch. He was appointed as the first professor and head of the department in 1970, and subsequently served as dean of the faculty. When he retired in 1997, at the age of 65, Bigalke was the longest standing member of the university's senate.

His academic career was marked by sabbatical appointments at the Technical University of Munich, in 1974, St John's College, Cambridge, in 1981, and Colorado State University in 1991. In addition, Bigalke participated in many international conferences in many parts of the world. His list of research publications runs to some 75 entries. He supervised the thesis work of one PhD and 20 MSc students. His professional interests were wide, but not so wide as to be seen as superficial.

Bigalke focused his interests, particularly toward the end of his career, on what can be termed wildlife management. This developed in tandem with his activities as a sport-hunter. Inge's venison dinners were something special.

After retirement from the University of Stellenbosch, Bigalke became a consultant to such organisations in the field of wildlife management as the South African Game Rancher's Association. He contributed much to the Cape Hunt and was president of the organisation. He also served as president of the Royal Society of South Africa, and the old Council for the Habitat. He was the chairman or vice-chairman of many advisory bodies, including the Council of the South African Museum, and the Environmental Committee of the South African Forestry Industry.

Bigalke died suddenly and unexpectedly on 28 November 2002. His death ended his honorary life membership of the Southern African Wildlife Management Association. His memory will, however, live on as a man who contributed much to the development of the profession of wildlife management in South Africa.