



Obituary

Vol. 6 (2): December 2003

Discoverer of the Cabo Blanco Monk Seal Colony

Eugenio Morales Agacino, 1914 – 2002

Scientific in the traditional way, a person of great culture and an excellent observer, D. Eugenio Morales Agacino (1914-2002) has been one of the greatest Spanish naturalists of the 20th century. His training at the Natural Science national Museum under the Direction of the renowned Ignacio Bolívar y Urrutia, marked his scientific evolution, as he often said. Fascinated by entomology since his youth, this was the branch of science to which he devoted a great part of his life. In this field, he described a great number of species and genres previously unknown to the scientific community. His contributions in the field of vertebrates were also of great importance and scientific relevance. In recognition of his life's work, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the Autonomous University of Madrid in 1998.

Attracted early on by Africa and especially by the desert, he began his adventures in those lands in 1932, undertaking several trips to Morocco in successive years. After the Spanish civil war, in which he suffered reprisals and was thrown into jail by the winners and losers alike, he was appointed by the Spanish government to study plagues of locusts in the Spanish Sahara. During these campaigns he produced numerous descriptions, not only of fauna – his primary endeavour – but also of matters of relevance to other branches of science, like local geography, ethnography, ancient stone engravings, folk tales of the Sahara etc., subjects where knowledge was very scarce at the time.



Morales Agacino with a Hyena in the Spanish Sahara (western Sahara).

His most spectacular and important discovery took place during one of his campaigns through the desert. On 30 December 1945, he located the cave which holds the monk seal colony of "Las Cuevecillas" on the Cabo Blanco peninsula Coast.



The first known photograph of "Las Cuevecillas" monk seal colony, taken by Morales Agacino on 30 December 1945.



A page from Morales Agacino's field note book, recording his observations at "Las Cuevecillas".

Earlier, Théodore Monod had tried without success to find the same place, but had only observed individual seals at sea. On the day of his discovery, however, Morales Agacino was able to observe around twenty seals resting on the sand, in a group formed by pups and adults, as well as several animals swimming in the water. He could even describe many characteristics of the animals, publishing in 1950 an important article in *Mammalia* where he related the location of his discovery and the observations he conducted. This same place, known today as “Cueva de Morales” still remains on the Coast of the Seals, and reminds us of his memory. As a matter of fact, this place has been a mute but inspiring witness to many conversations about monk seals and Saharan fauna among the researchers who follow in his footsteps on the coasts of the Sahara.

For the people who had the pleasure and privilege to know him, the fascinating stories of his scientific journeys by camel across the Sahara, transported us to better times and inspired us to continue working for the recovery of Saharan fauna, especially the monk seal.

– **Jorge Fernández Layna**, Fundación CBD-Habitat

Further reading

Morales Agacino E. 1950. Notes sur les Phoques-Moines (*Monachus monachus* Herm.) du Littoral Saharien Espagnol. *Mammalia* 14 (1-2): 1-6, 2 pls.