



Professor Esa Ranta passed away at his summer cottage in Parikkala (eastern Finland) on 29th August 2008; a place that had become very dear to him.

Born 14th August 1953 in Himanka, Esa Ranta belonged to a generation of researchers whose work forever transformed ecology in Finland. The effort was concentrated at the cutting edge of internationally important science. Whether Esa focused on bumblebee communities, *Daphnia* in rock pools, schooling behaviour of sticklebacks, or the amazing intricacies of population dynamics in space and time, his approach to science was always more than a narrow-minded look at impact factors. He produced books on statistics and population ecology, and authored hundreds of publications. But even more importantly for him, to be worthwhile science had to be fun. No wonder Esa quickly became a larger than life character in ecology, both in Finland and internationally.

To many young students, meeting him for the first time to discuss work was a revelation that, in the world of academia, intellectual minds still can create their own rules. As if to prove this from first impressions, entering his “office” required time for eyes to adapt to the dark. It resembled a cave, with windows covered in tin foil to exclude sunlight, scientific papers forming sediments on every semi-horizontal surface, stuffed animals lurking in crevices while music emanated from the latest gadget that he had made compatible with his computer system. His overflowing supply of enthusiasm and creativity always guaranteed a better mood for any of us insecure, and occasionally pessimism-prone, students. His research group at Helsinki University, called the Integrative Ecology Unit, is widely known by the abbreviation IKP, and anybody truly interested in knowing what this means can check the meaning of the Finnish phrase *Iloiset KonjakkiPojat* (... though girls were welcome to join the group too). Late nights in the office were often spent listening to wise supervisory gems including “if stuck in a B&B with no cooking facilities other than a kettle, then using it to boil together white wine, garlic and mussels works perfectly fine ...”. Relatively incomprehensible emails often followed that, when properly deciphered, metamorphosed into clever advice on, say, time series analysis or the Moran theorem.

Describing Esa requires mentioning his intellectual playfulness with whatever topic his enquiring mind encountered. On a visit to England, one of us was impressed by his ability to switch back and forth between cooking, running simulations, discussing science and partying. The next morning, now on a wild part of the Suffolk coast, talking science was impossible as walking alone used most of our functioning neural capacity.

As more neurons started reworking, the team spotted a pebble with a hole eroded through it; they then spotted another. Esa suggested we needed a club. The Club for Pebbles with Holes. The morning was spent deciding upon the structure of the committee, constitution, meetings, grants, the journal, review articles, the various awards, newsletter, mission statement, goals and our application for a huge European Union grant standardizing, mainstreaming and enhancing the societal benefits of pebbles with holes.

Esa then shockingly announced he was splitting the society and going off on his own taking many of the members. Soon there were three societies. The Club for Pebbles with Holes now had to compete with the International Society for Pebbles with Holes and especially the Extremely International Society for Aperture-enhanced Rocks. A happy afternoon was spent plotting the infighting, designing strategies for undermining each other and planning the mutual destruction of the entire edifice.

The planet without Esa is more predictable, more orderly, less creative, and much more boring. His spirit lives on whenever we do anything for the sheer intellectual joy of it, not for satisfying what-ever a committee is wanting from us.

Hanna Kokko (University of Helsinki), **Jouni Laakso** (University of Helsinki) & **William J. Sutherland** (University of Cambridge)