

Ilkka Hanski: The legacy of a multifaceted ecologist

Introduction: Ilkka Hanski, a visionary scientist with a big heart

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“I have been a fortunate person in many ways not the least for being able to live such a happy and good life.” These were the thoughts Ilkka Hanski so often expressed after he became aware that he had lost the battle with cancer and his life was coming to an end. I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to be Ilkka’s life companion for 26 years, until his death separated us.

Ilkka was born to a middle-class non-academic family in Tampere, central Finland. He lived with his parents, together with his brother Ari and younger sister Maarit. However, one of the first people who strongly impressed Ilkka was his grandmother Katri, a fisherwoman who lived on the coast of the Baltic Sea, in Virolahti, only 10 km from the Russian border. Together with his brother, Ilkka spent long summers, and often also weekends all year round, in the picturesque village of Hanski, where small-scale agriculture, fisheries and animal husbandry were practiced. That was the place, and the period of his life, in which he formed his emotional relationship with nature and his scientific curiosity. He was especially interested in birds and insects, not the least butterflies, which he passionately collected and studied through small experiments. The single most important occasion that threw him into the life of science was when he, a boy in his early teens, received a scientific paper together with a letter from a distinguished professor, Esko Suomalainen. The reason for the

letter was that Ilkka had found a rare butterfly, identified it and given it to the community of butterfly collectors and researchers.

Ilkka had a rich life. His research took him to many parts of the world, and he had close colleagues and students everywhere. Despite his commitment to research, he lived warm family life. He had three children, Katri, Matti and Eve-liina, from two marriages. Neither the children, nor myself, were ever excluded from Ilkka’s work. We often took part in field experiments, especially in the Åland Islands where the Glanville fritillary butterfly research became familiar to the entire family. Matti became an excellent field biologist and shared many expeditions with Ilkka to various parts of the world. Ilkka encouraged the children to explore, research and observe nature especially in their early lives, and later the family dinners were enriched with heated debates on various topics of life.

Ilkka’s personality was experienced by many colleagues as joyful, committed, ambitious and exemplary. However, Ilkka, as any person with a strong personality, also had his challenges in social life. Still, he did very much enjoy the company of his colleagues and students who formed his closest circle of friends. He had high respect for people with passion for new, fascinating research questions or exciting results, and was always keen to learn about them and have a conversation. He loved to have intellectual

debates on politics and was broadly literate in both fiction as well as learned knowledge. He was often invited to take part in societal debates in the media, especially on the topics of conservation of forests and wolves, the effects of biodiversity on our health, as well as on elements needed for high quality science.

Ilkka received many honours, more than most can even dream of, and he was of course very grateful and respected each of them. Still, what he enjoyed most was to be able to focus on the everyday practice of research, in reading interesting articles, carrying out conceptual thinking, supervising students, doing field experiments, analysing data and writing articles. It was not difficult to feel this passion of his. This tendency was perhaps the reason why he sometimes found it difficult to face colleagues whose interest had shifted from interesting research questions to preoccupation with their own careers and the associated successes and failures.

In private life again, rather than having many friends and relatives around him, Ilkka enjoyed a peaceful family life, especially in the 150 years old farmhouse which was the Virolahti home of the family. He enjoyed listening to old people from the village telling stories about his grandmother, the history of the region, and the changes in the wildlife that they had witnessed. Ilkka spent time maintaining buildings, restoring meadows and building a couple of traditional saunas. It was a place to experience a slow pace of life, the changes of seasons and the repetition of the yearly cycle, both in nature as well as in his own life. Much of our mutual time and the happiest moments were associated with Virolahti.

After receiving the BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge award in spring 2016 Ilkka added a section to his will explaining that the award was to be used for buying land. The land was to be used to develop a network of small protected areas (plots of 1 to 60 ha) in the Virolahti region of southeastern Finland. This

wish is now being fulfilled by Ilkka's children and myself. The Ilkka Hanski Nature Network is a payment for ecosystem services activity, where we, as locals, buy land from other locals – and protect it. The concept includes the idea that the protected plots are part of the larger countryside where land, mainly forest, is managed and used in multiple ways by the local community. The model described in Hanski (2011) was one of the ideas behind the Ilkka Hanski Nature Network. The main aim of the Ilkka Hanski Nature Network is to ensure biodiversity richness in the area and to provide a place for animals and plants to find peace. As part of the Finnish society's commitment to sustainable development (Finland we want by 2050), we have committed to showcasing the process behind the Ilkka Hanski Nature Network in order to motivate other communities to get their act together and do something to maintain the biodiversity and ecosystem services in their area, and to get satisfaction from it, which was Ilkka's wish.

Ilkka related to his cancer as he would have related to any biological process. He faced his illness calmly and was prepared for his death despite his relatively young age. He worked to the last days and was able to finalise his last book: *Messages from islands: a global biodiversity tour* (Hanski 2016). With this book he passed his legacy to future generations of scientists, conservationists and any one with love for life on earth. Ilkka died on 10 May 2016, at home, on a beautiful morning, surrounded by birdsong and the odours of spring, with the children and myself next to him.

References

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