

PROF. DR. L.D. BRONGERSMA 80 YEARS OLD.

By: Dr. M.S. Hoogmoed, Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie, Raamsteeg 4, Leiden, The Netherlands.

On Sunday 17 May 1987 Professor Dr. L.D. Brongersma celebrated his eightieth birthday.

Leo Daniel Brongersma was born in Bloemendaal on 17 May 1907. After he finished his schooling in Haarlem he started his biology studies in 1925 at the Municipal University of Amsterdam. In 1929 he passed his B.A. and in 1931 his doctoral examinations. On 19 September 1934 he finished his university education, obtaining his doctors title "cum laude" with his thesis "Contributions to Indo-Australian Herpetology".

Brongersma started his university career in 1928 when he became assistant at the Zoological Museum in Amsterdam, a post he fulfilled until 1934.

From 1932 he was employed by the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie in Leiden, a situation which lasted until 1972, except for a short interruption in 1933 due to the then depressed economic situation. During this period he was assistant with the Dubois collection (Indonesian fossils), curator of the Reptilia and Amphibia Section (up to 1958) and director (1958-1972).

Apart from his duties at the Museum Brongersma also fulfilled teaching commitments at the State University of Leiden, where as from 1938 he was involved with the instruction of systematic zoology, a junior-lecturer up to 1951, a lecturer from 1951-1964 and from 1964-1972 as a professor.

Even after his retirement in 1972 he could not stop working - after an interim period as a deputy-director at the State Museum of Geology and Mineralogy in Leiden, he continues his work at the

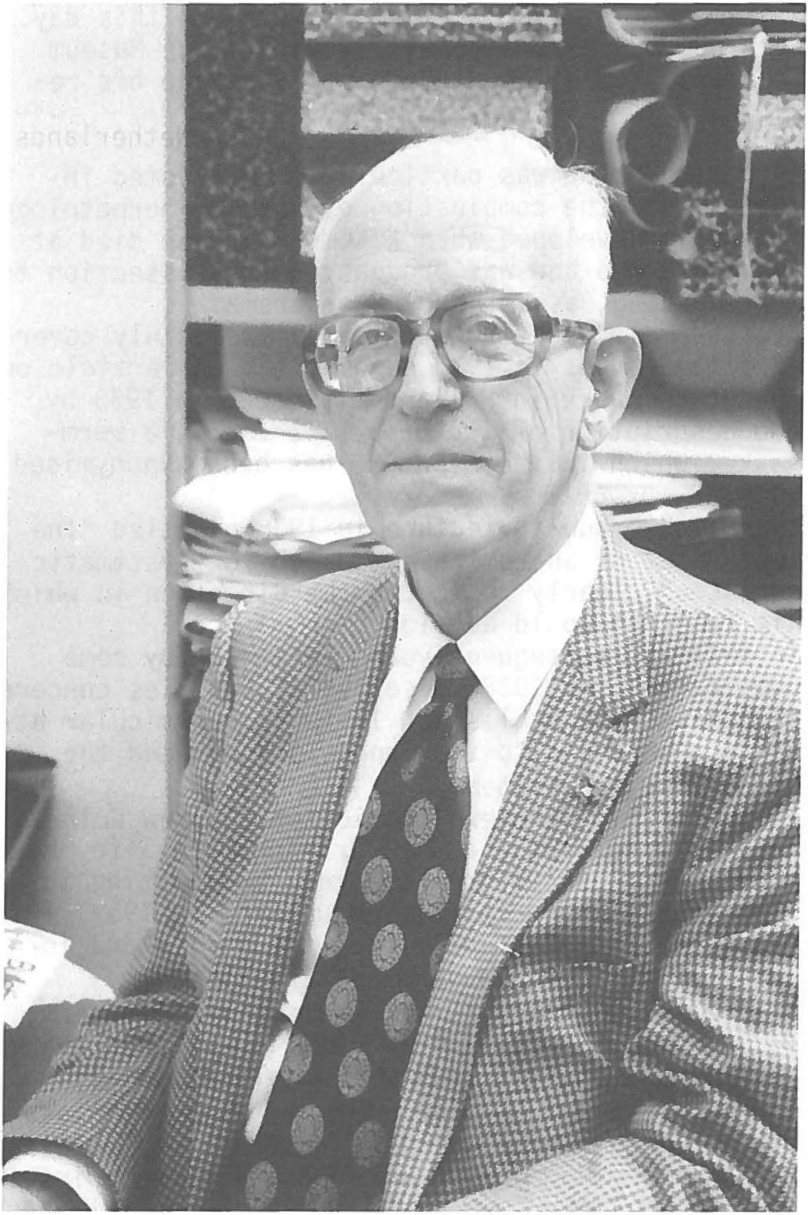


Foto 1. Prof. Dr. L.D. Brongersma in 1980.

Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie to this day. Even now Brongersma regularly visits the Museum (three to four times a week) to continue his research.

As a student he was particularly interested in anatomy and the combination of anatomy-herpetology naturally developed when a Komodo Dragon died at Amsterdam Zoo and was brought in for dissection to J.K. de Jong, assisted by Brongersma.

Brongersma's first taxonomic reviews mainly covered lizards, but in 1930 he published an article on the Grass snake in Holland, followed in 1933 by the description of *Leptotyphlops ihlei*, a worm-snake, which in the meantime has been synonymised with *Leptotyphlops macrolepis*.

snakes. His public lecture in 1938 entitled "The importance of anatomical research for systematic purposes" clearly indicated the direction in which his research would develop.

In 1949 and subsequent years (preceded by some publications in 1938) a series of articles concerning snakes was published. In these, particular attention was paid to the lungs, trachea and the blood-vascular system.

In the fifties the exploration of the New Guineas took an important place in Brongersma's life. He made four journeys to that area, culminating in the expedition to the Star Mountains in 1959. This was well documented on radio, t.v., film and in the book "To the Mountains of the Stars".

What happened exactly during the Star Mountains expedition I'll never know, but it marked a change of direction in Brongersma's interests towards Chelonia. Probably the turtle-races he organised in the longroom in Biak have something to do with it. One last article about intercostal arteries in snakes was immediately followed by an article on sea turtles and from then on things went downhill

from the ophiological point of view. Further articles about snakes were written, in one of which a supplement on the description of *Liasis boeleni* was given and later some nomenclatural problems were untangled, but most of his articles, as from 1967, were about sea turtles, culminating in the valuable book "European Atlantic Turtles" which gives a summary of nearly all historical material about these animals up to 1972. Most probably this change of interest is due to the fact that sea turtles with their trans atlantic migration actually are participating in one big race, a fact that appeals to Brongersma and on which he has clearly gambled.

His main attention is still focused on sea turtles, but he is also very busy finishing a historical manuscript on Eugène Dubois, the discoverer of *Pithecanthropos erectus*, and studying material on an Indo-Australian group of geckos.

In the field of collecting snakes Brongersma also did some pioneering work. It used to be the habit for museum collectors to simply knock snakes dead or drop them into alcohol alive. Brongersma introduced a more humane method: he just stuck the butt of a handrolled cigarette of strong tobacco into the snake's mouth. The nicotine proved fatal in a few minutes. This method proved more useful for museum work because the snakes did not become rigid in all sorts of clumsy coils. Nowadays the cigarette has been replaced by Nembutal injections, a barbiturate, but the effect remains the same.

Brongersma is also a master in the practical applications of herpetology. Due to him a fraudulent banana-importer probably had to pay a lot of extra import and excise duties, because after identification of a snake (*Leptodeira annulata*), which was among the bananas, it turned out that the bananas were not imported from the Congo but were from Middle or South America. That area fell

under a higher tax tariff than the Congo, so the trader should pay extra duty.

Concluding I would like to say that Brongersma also did pioneering work in the field of the application of anatomical material to snake systematics, which among other things was acknowledged in the work of Underwood who in 1967 published "A Contribution to the Classification of Snakes" - a book which even now is still largely followed for classifying snakes in systematic groups above generic level. Indispensable material for this classification was supplied by Brongersma.

Brongersma has been very busy studying sea turtles for the past thirty years, both their external and internal morphology, their migration, and their exploitation as it takes place for example at the Cayman Turtle Farm. His specialisation in this field expresses itself in his long lasting membership of the Sea Turtle Specialist Group of the Species Survival Commission of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. His honorary membership (for some twenty years) of the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists, as of the Herpetologists' League. Since 15 October 1983 Brongersma is a honorary member of the Dutch Snake Society.

On behalf of the Dutch Snake Society I wish to congratulate Brongersma on his 80th birthday and express my hopes that he can continue his research in good health at the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke History (State Museum of Natural History) for many years to come.

---

Translation: René van Marle.