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Aqua Vet 1980

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Landlocked Iowa may seem far removed from aquatic veterinary medicine. Yet even here, there are clients going without the expertise we as veterinarians could offer them—the aquarium hobbyists, the catfish raisers, the state fish hatcheries and zoos with aquatic species. Much of our basic science knowledge is applicable to aquatic species, as are our biomedical skills of observation, diagnosis and herd health management. Yet obviously in terms of optimum aquatic environmental conditions and how to achieve them, poikilotherm physiology, anatomy, diseases and etiologic agents we have much to learn, if we are to enter this field.

Since 1977, a program exists which acts as both an introductory course to aquatic veterinary medicine and a guide to areas of future research and study. It is sponsored by the Veterinary Colleges of Cornell and Pennsylvania Universities and is funded by the New York Sea Grant Institute. The four week program is jam packed with information delivered by the leading experts in the field. If your usual complaint is too much to learn in too little time, the case is doubly so here. Hence much of the information becomes deferred learning material and serves as a unique reference tool, replete with bibliographies, covering invertebrates, fishes and marine mammals.

In trying to incorporate my long held interest in the ocean and its inhabitants with my career of veterinary medicine, I applied to Aquavet until I was accepted for the 1980 session. Then I made idle plans to study ahead so I would be prepared to take finals a week early in order to arrive in Woods Hole, Mass. by May 18th. My anticipation was heightened by a booklet which Dr. Abt, Program Director, sent containing information on how to get there, what to bring, on who my 32 fellow classmates were, and the schedule of events. However, my imagination failed me in anticipating what an adventure Aquavet really is; which is not surprising, since Aquavet is an amalgam of a beautiful setting, gustatory delights, a collection of 33 aquanuts with varied aquatic backgrounds, and top notch teachers, who stimulated and expanded our minds and interests in all things aquatic, and the administrative wizardry of Drs. Abt and Rickard, who made it all happen.

The first week of Aquavet concentrated on invertebrates, identification and ecology, and fish anatomy and phylogeny. This week was dominated by the irrepressible Dr. Evans of Cornell University, who led us piedpiper fashion through the wonders of whatever captured his enthusiasm, which seemed to be everything. We were busy from 8 A.M. to 9 P.M. almost every day, after which we retired to a local pub to discuss the day's events and get acquainted. The finale of the week was a days sail on a huge schooner, the Westward, on which we learned to perform laboratory procedures using 19th century techniques and collected samples for our laboratory.

Dr. Evans holding a moon snail and its egg case.

Various topics and field trips filled the second week. The most important of these topics was aquaculture, since it represents the
area which is in greatest need of aquatic animal medicine. Presently, aquaculture is in its infancy in the U.S., producing only about 2% of the total world production of 6 million metric tons. Most of the aquaculture in the U.S. concentrates on raising fish for human consumption, i.e. catfish, trout, salmon and crawfish, although some tropical fish are raised in Florida for the aquarium trade. As with all herd (school) health programs, aquaculture requires the greatest emphasis on prevention, both in the development of vaccines and in reduction on environmental stresses. Two other special events that week were a field trip to a salt marsh led by Dr. John Teal, author of Life and Death of a Salt Marsh, and a day long overview of marine reptiles, primarily turtles, their biology and diseases by Dr. Jacobson.

Parasitology, histology and pathology of fishes kept us busy the third week. The lectures and labs were well structured and complementary. It was very instructional to open a fresh specimen and see the parasites in situ, rather than pickled in a glass jar. We also made a delightful field trip to Boston for a behind-the-scenes visit of the New England Sea Aquarium. Besides an incredible array of tropical fish, the aquarium has a huge three story circular tank in which sharks, marine turtles, and Moray eels spiral endlessly.

In the culminating week, Drs. Geraci and Medway led us into the realm of marine mammals, their diseases, nutritional requirements and methods to restrain them. Dr. Medway informed us of the program in Florida to save the Manatee from extinction, as well as data he helped collect on their clinical normals. In a way, this was a disappointing week as a panel of aquaveterinarians briskly concluded that there are no opportunities in the marine mammal area for veterinarians. More surprisingly, we learned that while opportunities in fish pathology and aquaculture do exist, they are jealously guarded by the fish biologists. The gloom such news brought was soon dispelled by the enthusiastic and excellent presentation of shellfish by Dr. Leibovitz of Cornell University. We ended Aquavet 80 with a button popping authentic New England clam bake and with difficulty bade farewell to our friends and the experience that was Aquavet 80.

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