

SVP - Obituaries

Yakutian Paleontologist Dr. Piotr Lazarev Passes Away at Age 74

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Dr. Piotr Alexeievich Lazarev, Director of the Mammoth Museum in Yakutsk, Yakutia, Russia, passed away on October 23 at the age of 75.

Piotr was known to Russian paleontologists as a student and follower of Dr. Prof. Nikolai Vereshchagin.

Piotr was born March 18, 1936 in the Yuner Olokh village of the Namskii District of Yakutia. After graduating from high school, he enrolled in Moscow State University, later selecting the Geography Department for his MS degree. Starting in 1959, he worked at the Laboratory of Quaternary Geology and Geomorphology within the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of Geology in Yakutsk, where he focused on studies of Pleistocene fauna.

As a PhD student of Prof. Nikolai Vereshchagin, Dr. Piotr Lazarev studied the Pleistocene horses of Yakutia and in 1974 defended his dissertation. Later, a thorough study of the frozen carcass of the Selerikan horse allowed Dr. Lazarev and Prof. Vereshchagin to recognize the Pleistocene horse *Equus caballus lenensis* Russanov as a separate species, *E. lenensis*, which was subsequently discovered in vast regions of northern Siberia (Vereshchagin & Lazarev, 1977).

In 2005 Dr. Piotr Lazarev defended his doctoral (second degree) dissertation "*Large Mammals in the Anthropogene of Yakutia*". His knowledge and leadership allowed him to organize a scientific group devoted to studies of the rich Pleistocene deposits in Yakutia and make a significant paleontological collection of mammals. This collection (which comprises now over 7,000 specimens) was incorporated by him into the "Archeo-Paleontological Collection Museum of Northeast Asia" in Yakutsk, which was opened for the 1982 INQUA Annual Meeting.

Dr. Piotr Lazarev was an avid collector and an experienced field organizer and worker. Despite his diminutive physical stature, he was considered by his colleagues to be a giant of Yakutian paleontology. He was a generous collaborator, recognizing that permafrost specimens preserving soft tissues as well as osteological material required a wide range of analyses to be studied to best advantage. During his last three decades he organized and participated in numerous paleontological expeditions to permafrost regions of Siberia and excavated paleontological sites and unique specimens, including the Berelekh mammoth graveyard, the Shandrin mammoth, the Akan, Abyi and Allaikha mammoths, the Malykhchanskii steppe bison, the Selerikan horse, the skeleton of the Churapcha woolly rhinoceros and even fossil remains of the Greenland whale. In 2010, he led an expedition to the new site of Batagai, in northern Yakutia, where rapidly melting permafrost had yielded several dramatic specimens. Here he descended steep slopes into a treacherous sinkhole, keeping up with colleagues one-third his age.

The skeleton of the Tirekhtyakh mammoth that was excavated by Dr. Lazarev and mounted with his consultation in 1974 was the first mounted mammoth skeleton to be viewed by the local public in the State Museum of History and Culture of the North in Yakutsk.

Due to the leadership and initiative of Dr. Lazarev, the Mammoth Museum was founded in Yakutsk in 1991, and Dr. Lazarev was appointed as its first director. The Museum, as a part of the Institute of Applied Ecology of the North (since 2011, a part of the Northeastern Federal University) became a scientific and cultural center of the region. Within its first the Museum became internationally recognized by excavations, studies, and storage of over 2,000 fossil specimens of large mammoth fauna of northeastern Siberia (woolly mammoth, woolly rhinoceros, Pleistocene horse, steppe bison, Pleistocene musk-ox, Pleistocene saiga, Pleistocene moose, reindeer, cave lion, etc.). Among those are such unique specimens as the Churapcha mammoth, the Yukagir mammoth, a star of the 2005 World Expo in Aichi, Japan, and the Maksunuokh mammoth. Other remarkable Pleistocene specimens include the baby mammoth Khroma, the Kolyma woolly rhinoceros, and Pleistocene horse and steppe bison specimens that have just begun to be investigated. The Oimyakon mammoth and the baby mammoth Khroma were displayed for the first time internationally in conjunction with the Vth International Conference on Mammoths and their Relatives, in Le Puy-en-Velay, France in 2010.

Since the 80s Dr. Lazarev was an organizer and participant of several international exhibits, including "All about Mammoths", shown in seven major cities of Japan, and mammoth exhibits in Germany, France and Korea. Since 1995, Dr. Lazarev became a vice-president of Russian Mammoth Committee after serving it as a Committee member since 1970. In 2007 he was a co-organizer and a host to the 4th International Mammoth Conference in Yakutsk (Sakha Republic, Russia). Due to Dr. Lazarev's efforts and enthusiasm working with the state officials on the organization of the Conference, state funding was awarded for most of the Conference events.

The author and co-author of over 150 publications (including 16 monographs/books) on geology and paleontology of the Pleistocene in Siberia, Dr. Lazarev traveled abroad sharing his expertise and knowledge through research presentations in Canada, Japan, Korea, France and Germany. He also was loved by the local public – he often was consulted by visitors to "his" Museum, and was frequently invited to local TV and radio stations for interviews and commentary on recent research.

The scientific work of Dr. Lazarev was recognized by his country: among his state titles, he was an Honorary Scientist of the Yakutian (Sakha) Republic and an Honorary Worker in Science and Technology of the Russian Federation (2011). In 2007 he became a state Prize-Winner in Science and Technology of the Yakutian (Sakha) Republic. Since 1992 Dr. Lazarev was a member of the Russian Committee of the International Museum Council of UNESCO.

Last summer, just months before his death, Dr. Piotr Lazarev participated in an expedition to northern Yakutia as a member of the scientific team to study a newly discovered young mammoth nicknamed Yuka. It was his last expedition to "hunt" his favorite mammoths... Dr. Piotr Lazarev will always be remembered as a spirited contributor to our knowledge of the Pleistocene fauna of the mammoth steppe.



Photo courtesy of Randall Hyman.