

Enrique Balech Capdeville (1912–2007)

Enrique Balech Capdeville, a 'pioneer' micro-algal taxonomist, was born on 17 August 1912 in a French family at Telen, La Pampa, Argentina. He studied natural sciences, specializing in marine plankton, at the Instituto Superior del Profesorado 'J. V. González' in Buenos Aires. At the age of 25, he became the Chief of the Laboratory of Protistology of the Museo Argentino de Ciencias Naturales 'Bernardino Rivadavia' and later that of Estación Hidrobiológica Puerto Quequén at Necochea until his retirement in 1982, except for a few intermittent other assignments.

Between 1951 and 1958, he visited various institutions on fellowships and as a visiting researcher – Scripps Institution of Oceanography, California, USA, on John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship; Station Biologique de Roscoff on a French Government Fellowship, and Department of Oceanography of Texas A&M University as Visiting Researcher. During his long scientific career, Balech studied almost all dinoflagellate genera. With the limited laboratory facilities available, he produced exquisite illustrations of many species and authored a large number of research publications, including monographs. His *Opera Magna* on the dinoflagellates of the southwestern Atlantic includes illustrations of over 330 species, with information on their ecology and distribution. His monograph on the potent bloom-forming genus *Alexandrium*, which covers all the species of the genus, is considered a fundamental and useful contribution to the taxonomy of this genus. His descriptions of the surface currents in southwestern Atlantic based on his biogeographic studies of dinoflagellates during the 1960s proved accurate even 20 years later, as confirmed from satellite imagery.

Majority of the bloom-forming marine micro-algal toxic species (70 out of 99 known species) belong to the dinoflagellate group (a note that highlights the progress of marine taxonomy vis-à-vis harmful algal bloom species appears in this issue). Many of them are free-living and range in size from 20 to 200 μm . At light-microscope level, they are distinct by the presence of two dissimilar flagella and at ultra-structural level, they show either a smooth or ornamented cell cover or thecal plate. *Alexandrium*, *Dinophysis*, *Gymnodinium*, *Gyrodinium* and *Prorocentrum* are few prominent genera of the dinoflagellate group.



Rut Akselman Cardella

Balech often mentioned that he became a full-time researcher only after retirement. In 1985, he revisited and revised six species and discovered one new species, all belonging to the genus *Alexandrium*. It was an irony that he was dismissed from the position of the Chief of the Estación Hidrobiológica Puerto Quequén in 1947 for political reasons,

which constrained him to take up a teaching job in a high school. However, his love for the subject did not dampen his taxonomic work. He continued to work from his home and maintained the museum at the Estación, at times at his own cost. At the Third International Conference on Toxic Dinoflagellates, held at St Andrews, Canada in June 1985, Balech was recognized as a pioneer for his invaluable contributions to the understanding of red tide events. His popular articles in the local language, and the book *Geocidio' La destrucción del Planeta* published in 1978, speak about his concern for the deteriorating environment.

Balech passed away on 26 August 2007, a few days after his 95th birthday.

This is a tribute to Prof. Enrique Balech Capdeville. The occasion marks his 96th birthday and the first anniversary of his passing away as well. Against the general belief that taxonomy is not promising as a career, Balech was completely attached to this field and worked with utmost dedication.

Source:

1. Balech, E., *Phycologia*, 1989, 28, 206–211.
2. *Harmful Algae News*, 2007, p. 34.
3. Proceedings of the International Conference on Toxic Dinoflagellates, St Andrews, New Brunswick, Canada, 8–12 June 1985.

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