

Victor Abramovich Kovda, 1904–91

‘My father was from North Caucasus, so I have a big temper; my mother was Ukrainian, so I have two big tempers’ — is how Victor Kovda was apt to characterize himself, though in our many years of happy association we never witnessed evidence of any need for such an assertion. Indeed this most admirable of friends and colleagues was quite equably disposed — a sharp-minded but placid planner of fine judgement to the end. He is survived by his delightful Wife, Alexandra, and by their daughters, of whom one is a graduate geographer and the other a biologist.

Born on 29 December 1904 at Dzauzhikau (Vladikavkaz) in the Kuban Region, midway between the Black and Caspian Seas, this ‘grand old man of Russian pedology’ (Fig. 1) died in hospital in Moscow on 24 October 1991 at the age of 87 after a brief illness, having been in excellent form through most of his last several months *inter alia* when he had proposed, at the inaugural meeting of the Advisory Board of Experts of the Verandsky International Centre for Biosphere Studies in Pushchino on 7 June 1991, a major project on ‘Human-caused Soil-ecological Changes and Their Effect on The Biosphere’, of which a ‘Background Statement’ was published in the Autumn issue of *Environmental Conservation* (18[3], p. 197, 1991). He subsequently told one of us that he had been thinking about the need for such a project for many years, that it was his greatest remaining ambition to see it into being, and so he was happy that the first active step towards its realization had been taken of its unanimous adoption by the above-mentioned Board.

Education and Early Career

Graduating originally from the Kuban Agricultural Institute in the town of Krasnodar, young Kovda was a scientific worker from 1930 — during 1940–58 as Chief of the Laboratory — at the Dokuchaev Institute of Soil Science, Moscow, where he obtained his PhD in 1935 at the State University, which as soon afterwards as 1939 granted him their coveted DSc. During 1950–53 he was Organizer and Chairman, in the USSR Academy of Sciences, of their Committee for Great Hydro-technical Constructions, becoming apprehensive it is thought of their effect in 1953. In that year he was elected a Corresponding Member of the USSR Academy of Sciences (Akademia Nauk) and became Professor and Chief of Soil Science at Moscow State University. This last, one of the most prestigious of all positions in their traditionally national subject, he held with distinction until 1958, also serving as Chief Adviser to the Academy of Sciences of China (Academia Sinica) in 1954 and 1955.

During 1958–65, Kovda was Director of the Department of Natural and Exact Sciences of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Paris, France, while serving in 1964 as President of the Vth Commission of the International Society of Soil Science (ISSS). From 1965–68 he was Scientific Secretary of the UN Scientific Committee on Science and Technology and Their Application for the Advancement of Developing Countries, in New York, NY, USA. During 1968–74 he was President of the International Society of Soil Science, being President of the Tenth ISSS Congress, which was held in Moscow in 1974. He also served from 1970–73 as Vice-Chairman of

the Committee of UNESCO’s ‘Man and The Biosphere’ Programme, organizing and editing the proceedings, entitled ‘Use and Conservation of The Biosphere’, of the noted and widely pioneering ‘Intergovernmental Conference of Experts on the Scientific Basis for Rational Use and Conservation of the Resources of the Biosphere’, held at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris from 4 to 13 September 1968, which was better known as the ‘Biosphere Conference’.

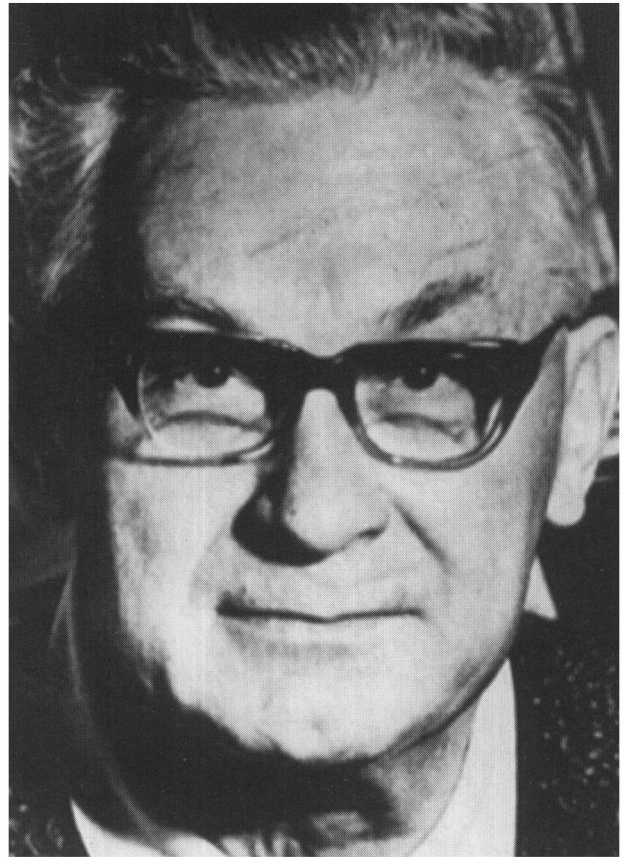


FIG. 1. Victor Abramovich Kovda, about 1990.

Later Career and Attainments

Starting in 1969 as its Organizer, Kovda was Director of the Institute of Agrochemistry and Soil Science of the USSR Academy of Sciences, situated at Pushchino, Moscow Region, until 1981. Thereafter, what was apt to be referred to as the ‘Kovda Institute’, was restyled the Institute of Soil Science and Photosynthesis, and of it he remained a Scientific Adviser. Meanwhile he continued to be quite admirably active in helping others with advice and much-valued support, being *inter alia* for many years and right up to his death the Advisory Editor of this Journal in matters pertaining to Soils and Erosion. In this dualty of important fields he is succeeded on the panel of our Journal by his former student and assistant, Professor Vladimir P. Bashkin.

To the above indications of Victor Kovda’s affiliations to leading academies, etc., should be added his Membership of the World Academy of Art and Science, Honorary Membership of the Indian National Academy of Sciences,



FIG. 2. A typical sharing of chairmanship (from left to right: Kovda, Polunin, and Academician Aleksandr L. Yanshin).

Honorary Membership of the Indian Society of Soil Science, Honorary Membership of the Hungarian Soil Science Society, Foreign Membership of the Agricultural Academy of France, honorary doctorates of various Western European universities, and above all his presidency, from 1973 to 1976, of the 'environmental summit' of ICSU's SCOPE (which he always referred to as 'Scòpé'). In addition he was a Councillor of the World Council For The Biosphere from its inception in 1974 and the recipient of numerous awards, including no fewer than six USSR State ones (despite being seemingly apolitical). He also received the Order of Friendship of China, the Dokuchaev Gold Medal, the Silver Medal and Prize of the French Society of Soil Science, the UNESCO Prize for Science,* and the Diploma of Honour on Irrigation and Drainage of the International Commission of the United Nations.

Author of more than 600 publications for the most part in Russian, Kovda was celebrated for some 30 of these

* In 1972, 'heading a group of nine Austrian Research Workers'.

Gratifying Recognition of a Colleague

Real eminence of outstanding academics is rarely recognized publicly in the manner of even transitory performance on the stage or in sport, yet scholars are the ones whose products are apt to have major, even global, significance. So it is warmly gratifying to observe that one of our distinguished panel of Advisory Editors, our long-time friend and Harvard colleague Professor Richard Evans Schultes — who fortunately is not averse to personal publicity provided it is truthful and reasonably dignified — has this year come in for widespread recognition in various ways of which the following three have been chosen for information to our readership:

1. The Linnean Gold Medal for 1992, characterized by the President of the donor Linnean Society of London as 'this well-deserved honour'. Since its inception in 1888 this, one of science's most prestigious awards, has been bestowed on only 7 Americans, 5 of whom were Harvard Professors.
2. The Harvard Medal for 1992, the words of the President of Harvard University in bestowing the honour on our

being monographs of more or less major dimensions — including *Solonchaks and Solonets* (1937), *The Origin and Regime of Saline Soils* (two volumes, 1946 and 1947), *Principles of Pedology* (two volumes, 1973), *Biogeochemistry of Soil Cover* (1985), *Problems of Protection of the Soil Cover and the Biosphere of the Planet* (1989), and *Governmental Ecological Policy* (1991). In addition he was co-Author and Editor of the following maps: Soil Map of Iran (1941–45), Soil Map of China (1955, 1958), Soil Map of Asia (1960, 1971), and Soil Map of the World (1965, 1971).

From our environmentalists' viewpoint Victor Kovda was clearly a major figure — not merely in the vital field of soil science but above all in being perhaps the first far-seeing biospherologist having full comprehension of the immense implications of our only human and indeed all life's home being The Biosphere. This realization prompted his original proposal with one of us (NP) of an International Centre for Biosphere Studies. Creation of this last was further recommended in the Declaration of the International Symposium 'Man and Biosphere: History and Modern Times', held during 20–25 March 1989 in Pushchino (cf. *Environmental Conservation*, 16[3], pp. 280–2 with 3 figs, 1989), following which it was finally established as described by the other of us (VAD, *Idem*, 17[3], p. 273, 1990). Further outcomes of this realization have included Kovda's far-sighted proposal described in the second paragraph of this note, our own of Biosphere Day*, and the proposal of a Global Commons Trust Fund†. Fig. 2 shows a typical sharing of chairmanship.

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* Of which the latest published version is on page 194 of our current volume (*Environmental Conservation*, 19[3], p. 194, 1992); see also *ibid.* page 193 headed 'Biosphere Day and Its Needed Fund and Prizes' and our Foundation for Environmental Conservation's Promoting and Collating of Biosphere Clubs. — Ed.

† See the Guest Editorial 'A Proposal in Observation of Biosphere Day: Repairing The Biosphere Through a Global Commons Trust Fund', by Professor Christopher D. Stone (*Idem*, pp. 3–5).

Advisory Editor being: 'Unabashed by your love for Harvard, you are an inspirational teacher of botany and an international explorer who has sought to preserve not only the rain-forest, but also the cultures of those [humans] who live there. Your life's work has brought many honors to you and your Alma Mater.'

3. 'Jungle Botanist' — the title of a 24-pages-long 'Profile' in *The New Yorker* of 1 June 1992, opening with an excellent drawn likeness. Included are such observations as 'Schultes may be the only living person to have more than two million acres of the Earth named after him — Sector Schultes, an Amazonian tract thus formally designated in 1986 by the Colombian government.' So evidently due major-scale recognition can still come, whether the subject welcomes it or not, as we observe with special pleasure in this instance in which, even if public opinion does not recognize a discovery or scholarly advance, a national government may do so.

NICHOLAS POLUNIN