

Obituary

Alain Sournia, phycologist and philosopher (1940-2018)

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Alain Sournia passed away on May 28th, 2018 at 77. After his Master degree in Biological Oceanography from the Faculty of Science of the Paris University (France) in 1962, he obtained a position in 1965 as research assistant at the Overseas Fisheries Laboratory of the French National Museum of Natural History (MNHN, Paris, France). He then completed a PhD thesis on planktonic diatoms from the Mozambique Channel and Mauritius (Fig. 1), which he defended in 1968. He was a laureate of the "Foundation for the Vocation" in 1969. In the late 70's-early 80's, Alain Sournia worked at the MNHN antenna on Moorea Island and at Takapoto (French Polynesia). He became Assistant Professor in Zoology at the MNHN (1981) where he worked in the General and Applied Ichthyology Laboratory. In 1983, he joined the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) as "Directeur de Recherche". He spent several years at the Roscoff Marine Station (1984-1987) and then at the Geology Laboratory of MNHN (1987-1995). The last ten years of his career in Paris were devoted to the research management, acting as "chargé de mission" (policy officer) first at the CNRS "National Institute of Sciences of the Universe" (INSU), from 1994 to 1999, then at the Living Resources Department of the French "National Research Institute for Sustainable Development" (IRD) from 2000 to 2005, notably as a member of the "National Fleet Commission".

Alain Sournia was awarded the French Academic Palms in 1982 and the Medal of the French Society of Oceanography in 1983. He was also a member of several other international scientific associations such as the "Committee for Algae" of the "International Association for Plant Taxonomy" (1986-1996).



A world renowned phytoplankton taxonomist and specialist of dinoflagellates and nanophytoplankton (i.e. unicellular microalgae with a cell size comprised between 2 and 20 μm), this passionate scientist contributed to more than 70 scientific articles (listed below). He also wrote and/or directed the publication of several important books on phytoplankton including the "Phytoplankton Manual" in 1978, two volumes of "The Atlas of Marine Phytoplankton"

published between 1986 and 1990 in collaboration with M.-J. Chrétiennot-Dinet and C. Billard and a book on "Noxious Phytoplankton along French coasts" in 1991. During his stay in French Polynesia, Alain Sournia pioneered work on the calcification of reef-building corals and on the productivity of atoll lagoons. One of his main research topics was the study of phytoplankton cycles at daily or annual time scales. In this context, he launched a bi-monthly long-term time series at the end of the 500 m long Roscoff pier, which included a number of physico-chemical parameters as well as routine counting of phytoplankton. Although temporarily interrupted between 1993 and 1996, this time series was restarted in 1997 in the framework of the SOMLIT program and complemented by sampling at an offshore station located at 2.5 miles off Roscoff (<http://www.sb-roscoff.fr/fr/observation/communautes/phytoplankton/somlit-astan>). Another major topic studied by Alain Sournia was the role of hydrological fronts on marine productivity, notably the Ushant tidal front, which develops at the entrance to the English Channel in summer. In this context, he was particularly interested in "red tides", i.e. phytoplanktonic blooms generally dominated by dinoflagellates that can develop in conjunction with frontal systems and he has been instrumental in the launching of the "National Program on Harmful Algal Blooms" (PNEAT) in the early 1990's. Alain Sournia's far-sighted vision in phytoplankton research is still being felt in France and abroad.

After his retirement in 2005, he devoted himself to his other passion: philosophy. He wrote ten books where he developed his concept of "wild philosophy" (<https://philosophiesauvage.com/>), an interest already announced by his first two books written during his professional activity and published at author expenses: the first one was devoted to neurobiology and was honored by the Jean-Rostand Prize, while the second one dealt with the Greek philosopher Heraclitus.

Acknowledgments

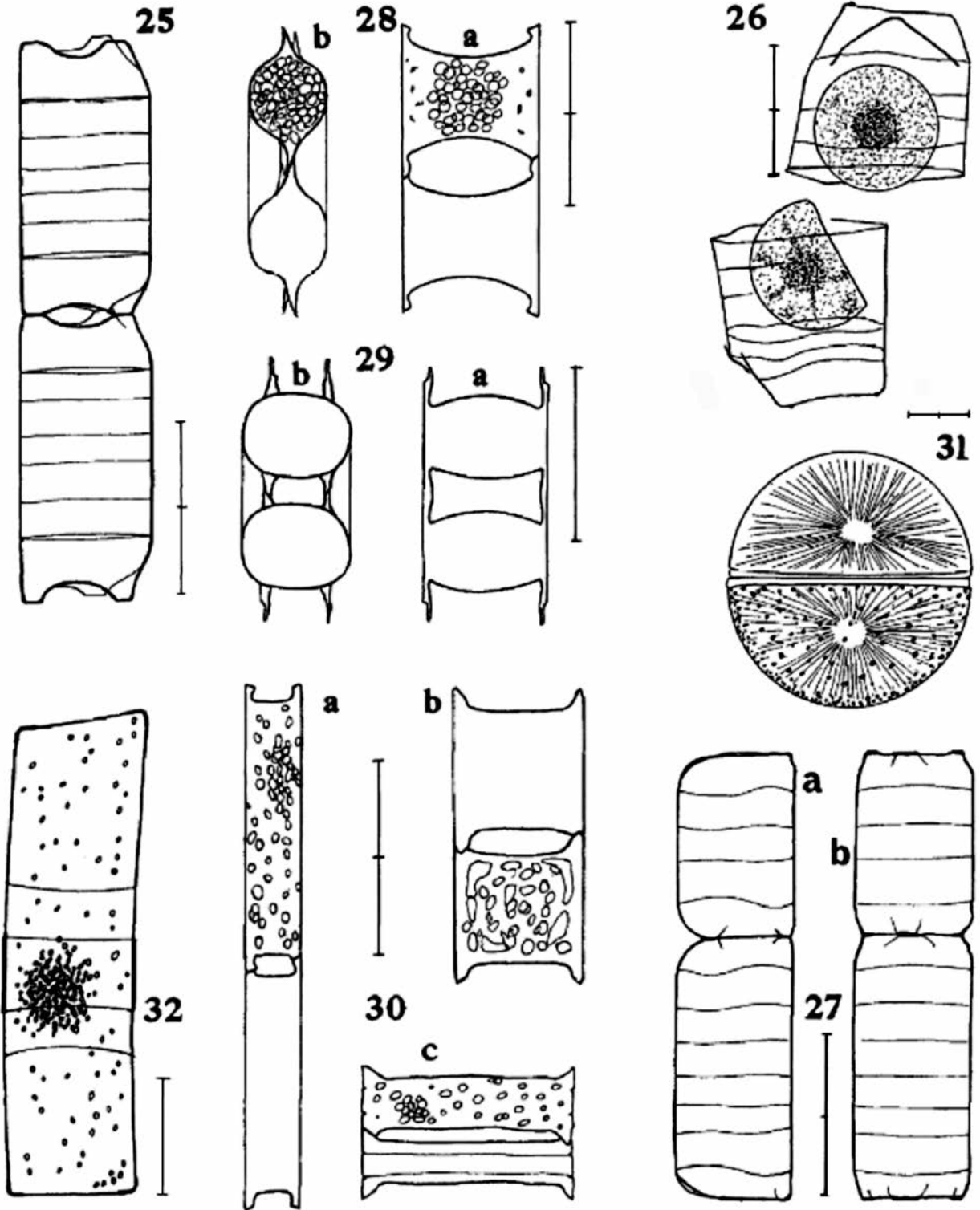
We warmly thank all former colleagues and relatives of Alain Sournia who helped us to write this obituary by their touching remembrances.

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This list of publications is also available from: <https://www.mendeley.com/community/alain-sournia-publications/>

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Original drawing from A. Sournia reprinted from his 1968 opus entitled 'Diatomées planctoniques du Canal de Mozambique et de l'île Maurice'. *Mémoires ORSTOM*, 31: 120 pp.

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