

OBITUARY

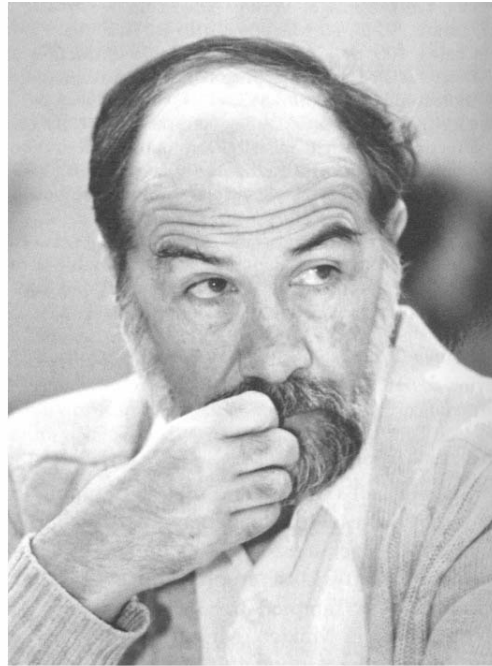
JOSÉ TICUL ÁLVAREZ SOLÓRZANO: 1935–2001

José Ticul Álvarez Solórzano, born in Mexico City on 26 February 1935, was the only son of Felisa Solórzano Dávalos, a nurse, and José Álvarez del Villar, an ichthyologist. His first studies were at Salesiano College, where he clearly showed his abilities for drawing and natural sciences. During his younger years, Ticul spent his holidays working as an overseer at a ranch that raised bulls for the “*corridos*” (bullfights). This was the formative period, when he gained his love for mammals and fieldwork.

He started his career in biology at the National School of Biological Sciences of the National Polytechnic Institute (Escuela Nacional de Ciencias Biológicas, Instituto Politécnico Nacional [ENCB]) in 1954. As a student, he started the mammalian collection at the institute, which would later become one of the most important collections in Mexico. During this period, he also worked at the National Autonomous University of Mexico and in the office of the General Director of Hunting under the National Secretary of Agriculture and Grazing (Dirección General de Fauna Silvestre, Secretaría de Agricultura y Ganadería). He published his first 2 papers in 1958–1959, while still an undergraduate.

Teresa García, one of his bachelor’s degree classmates, recalls,

During the time that we were students, we liked to collect plants in different areas of the northern Valley of Mexico. One time, a student one year behind us, asked if he could join us on our trips. He was interested in camping and setting mousetraps. No one else in the group was interested in mammals, and less so in animal fieldwork. I do not remember to which place we went on that occasion, but Ticul arrived with his mousetraps and skinning kit. In the afternoon, he set his traps. The next day, before anyone else got up, he recovered the traps, and began to skin the specimens in one corner of our camp. He did not ask anybody for help, but as each of us woke up, we went to see what Ticul was doing. He began to teach us the technique for skinning



Ticul Álvarez at a seminar in the National School of Biological Sciences (ENCB).

mice. Soon, everybody was enthusiastically helping the younger student. The situation was so magical. Ticul changed a field trip in botany to a biological survey, including plants, mammals, and Ticul collecting fleas, as well. The enthusiasm that he brought to that trip, and the ways to integrate other sciences into a survey and not just a field trip, continued through the years. On these early trips, we collected the first specimens of the Mammals Collection of the ENCB.

In 1959, he married M. Rebeca Castañeda and presented his bachelor’s thesis, “Catalog and Key of Mexican Rodents” (Catálogo y claves de los roedores Mexicanos). On the basis of this work, he was invited by E. Raymond Hall to the University of Kansas to obtain a master’s de-



Ticul Álvarez on his last field trip to La Michilia, Durango, Mexico, in about 1978.

gree, culminating in his thesis, "The Recent Mammals of Tamaulipas, Mexico," in 1962.

That year he returned to Mexico and began working part-time in the Department of Prehistory at the National Institute of Anthropology and History (Departamento de Prehistoria, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia [INAH]) under the direction of the archaeologist José Luis Lorenzo on studies of the environment of Mexican archaeological sites. His work in the field of archaeozoology and paleontology was pioneering, founding archaeozoology in Mexico and creating the only reference collection of this type in Mexico. He was an employee of the INAH until 1985, but he continued going to the laboratory for research with and direction of students, until physical disability prevented this activity.

At the INAH, he worked with one of his students, Fernando Sánchez, who remembers,

I had the opportunity to know Ticul Álvarez as my professor, working companion, and friend. We made many field trips together, he as a zoologist and me as a botanist, but his point of view always was the center of the work. This love for his work always was extraordinary, and I believe that this love was the cause of his continued development of his professional responsibilities, teaching, and advising students, until the loss of his eyesight.

Ticul was a meticulous critic and perfectionist, qualities he tried to transmit to his students, with the intention of maintaining high standards of research. Because of this characteristic, some people thought that he was a gruff person, but he was always looking for ways to improve the projects.

For more than 30 years, we worked together and had a strong friendship, even with its ups and downs. To us, lunch on Thursdays was like religion, and we talked about science, politics (but not always with the same point of view), music, and family matters. I need to confess that for nearly 1 year after his death, every Thursday I had the impulse to go to his laboratory to take him to lunch, enjoy the chatting, and have one good glass of vodka.

I lament not knowing him early in my life because I felt deprived of participating in a great part of his education and friendship. Of one thing I am sure, his was an intimate friendship. And a strong hug, my friend!

From 1962 to 1965, he was Curator with Bernardo Villa of the Mammals Collection of the Biology Institute of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (Instituto de Biología, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México).

Beginning in 1964, he served as a professor of the ENCB in collaboration with his father, at that time in the Laboratory of Hydrobiology (now the Laboratory of Chordata), and continued his great project of building a Mexican mammalian collection of the highest standards (building it to 42,200 specimens). In addition, he developed a herpetological collection (17,000 specimens) and a small bird collection (1,500 specimens). At the ENCB, he produced a great part of his scientific work in mammal, amphibian, and reptilian studies and prepared many taxonomists in this field. He continued to work at the ENCB until his death in 2001.

Two of his last students were Nansy Sánchez and Jorge Villalpando.

In February 1992, we were providing social services in the Terrestrial Chordates Laboratory of the National School of Biological Sciences of the National Polytechnic Institute, where we met "Maestro" Ticul Álvarez. During the first days, we were working with owl pellets, skinning specimens, and identifying specimens. Between April and May, something was concerning Maestro Ticul, so he did not give any attention to our work. In his style, he would arrive in the morning, always at the same time, say "buenos," get a cup of coffee, and go to his office. Later, he would make a round through the laboratory, the collection area, and near the area where we were

working. He never said anything, but he always knew what was happening. He never made a comment in the identification of the specimens that we were studying, but we knew if we were right or wrong by the expression on his face. One day we were working with bats (How can we forget our first day with the genus *Glossophaga!*), and were arguing about the different and peculiar characteristics of a species. Without seeming to pay attention, Maestro Ticul, was near us and asked, "What species is it?" We looked at each other, and with a broken voice, we gave the characteristics that we saw and which species we thought it was. At that moment, he was sitting near us with his coffee mug and said, "OK, you know it." From that day until he went to the hospital for the last time, we always worked together in the "identification session." In these sessions, we would switch from identification of the species to natural history of the species, history, politics, music, and soccer scores. At this moment, with great love, we acknowledge how much we learned, not only in science and general culture, but also as persons.

Between 1971 and 1976, Ticul worked as the assistant director in the office of the General Director of Wildlife (Fauna Silvestre), with the goal of making better use of and protecting the wildlife resources of Mexico. Here, he began studies for the sustainable use of natural resources.

In 1980, he lost his sight after a lifetime's struggle with diabetes, but this physical incapacity did not stop his spirit, and he continued working. He demonstrated that, with help, many things could be accomplished. He was a shining example to many of his students. More than half of his publications were written after he lost his sight.

He was a researcher and a professor all his adult life. In 1983, he was admitted to the National Research System (Sistema Nacional de Investigadores), Mexico's unique national organization of scientists, at level III, the highest level in the system, and continued at level III over many evaluations.

In 1988, he received an award for scientific merit from the World Cultural Council, and the National Polytechnic Institute gave him the "Lázaro Cárdenas Award" for his meritorious ca-

reer at the Polytechnic. In 1989, he became Professor Emeritus and in 1994 received the Institute's "Juan de Dios Bátiz Award" for his years of service. In 1997, the American Society of Mammalogy elected him as an Honorary Member, its highest recognition for a career in mammalogy, and in the same year, the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia published a book in his honor, *Homenaje al profesor Ticul Álvarez*. In 1999, the Southwestern Association of Naturalists gave him the "Robert L. Packard Outstanding Educator Award."

Michael Bogan came to the ENCB in Mexico City around 1980.

The way I remember the event is that I was in Mexico City for a meeting and to give a paper. During my visit, a couple of us went out to the "Poly" to see Ticul Álvarez and examine some *Myotis*. Ticul Álvarez's vision was quite bad by then, but we talked for some time and then I began examining *Myotis*. There was one specimen that I was unsure of and Ticul said to give him the skull. He took the skull, felt it carefully with his fingers, and then pronounced, "This is a *Myotis californicus*." He was absolutely right!

Over the years, he served as a technical advisor to the Natural History Museum in Mexico City (Museo de Historia Natural), to the Minister of Health and Public Assistance (Secretaría de Salubridad y Asistencia), to the Ecology Institute (Instituto de Ecología), and other federal agencies. He had been a professor of many subjects, but he always gave lectures on mammalogy and herpetology. During his last decades, he was a member of 12 scientific societies and was a founding member of 7. During his career, he participated in more than 20 research projects, supervised 30 theses, and wrote more than 132 scientific papers, book chapters, and books. His most important contributions were in mammalogy and herpetology, describing 22 species and subspecies of mammals, reptiles, and amphibians of the Recent and Pleistocene epochs. He has been recognized as one of the most productive researchers of vertebrates in Mexico.

Ticul Álvarez was meticulous, critical, and a perfectionist. He tried to transmit these qualities to students and friends, with the belief that this attitude can be applied to day-to-day life as well as research. He had a very forceful manner, but was always open to helping students and friends.

I always will remember him as a father and teacher but equally as my colleague and friend.

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