

Oswaldo Vasquez Ravelo (1959-2024)

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Oswaldo E. Vasquez Ravelo, a prominent marine biologist who was deeply involved in whale conservation in the Dominican Republic (DR) and elsewhere, died in Limassol, Cyprus on 15 November, 2024, aged 65. Oswaldo (known to many by his middle name, Emi) was born in Santo Domingo on 5 July, 1959. At the age of just 16 he obtained a scholarship to study in the Soviet Union, so off he went to the USSR as an inexperienced teenager. He recalled traveling by train in a short-sleeved shirt and campana jeans through a vast, cold land that was so foreign to someone from a Caribbean island; he later commented, "I knew how to say only two things in Russian: *Where's the toilet?*, and *I'd like a beer, please*".

He spent six months in Moscow taking an immersive course in technical Russian, during which time he met his wife-to-be Niki, an architecture student from Cyprus. At the end of their first year they were both assigned to university in Odessa, Ukraine; and it was there, in 1981, that Oswaldo obtained a M.Sc. degree in biology. It was also in Odessa that his eldest child, Marlen, was born. In those days, men were forbidden to enter the maternity ward; but at the suggestion of a friend he borrowed a white coat and pretended to be a medical student. He was swept up by a professor and taken on ward rounds, and to his horror was asked to estimate how dilated a very pregnant woman was; with

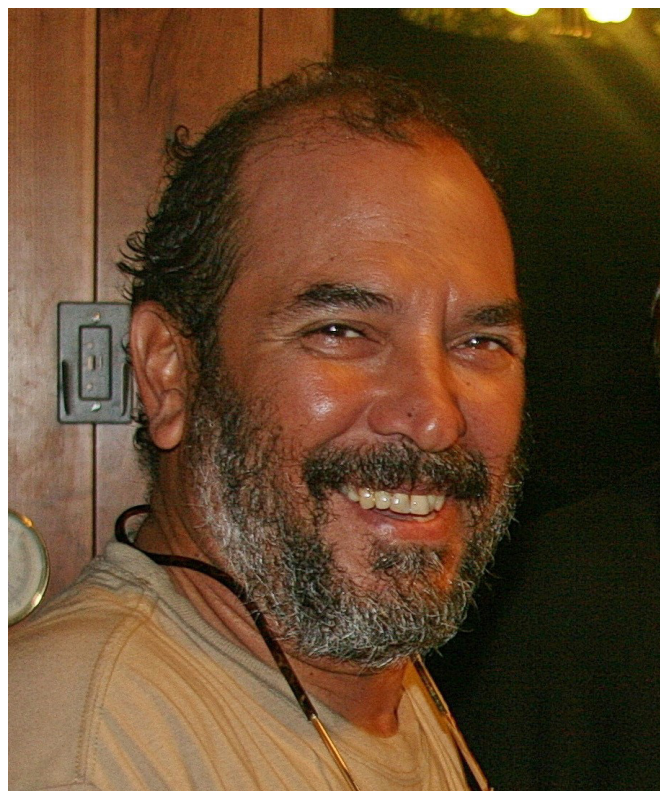


Figure 1. Oswaldo Vasquez Ravelo

typical quick thinking he said, "I'm sorry, doctor, but we haven't yet covered that in class."¹

After graduation and spending some time in Cyprus, Oswaldo returned with his new family to the Dominican Republic, where he became deeply involved in marine biology. There, he met Professor Idelisa Bonnelly di Calventi, who essentially established the field of marine science in the country. Eventually, he became

¹In 2008, Oswaldo returned to Odessa for the first time since his graduation, to attend the Holarctic Conference on Marine Mammals, and to be the best man at the wedding of two of us (PJC and YVI). As best man, he was supposed to faithfully guard the bride from the Russian wedding tradition in which she'd be captured and returned to the groom on payment of a ransom; he failed miserably in this task, because - as usual - this uniquely social man was deeply involved in conversation with others.

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a research scientist and professor at the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo (UASD), working at the institution that Calventi had founded in 1966, El Centro de Investigaciones de Biología Marina (CIBIMA).

In 1986, the Dominican Republic established the first humpback whale sanctuary in the world, focused on the North Atlantic's largest breeding ground on Silver Bank (Banco de la Plata); Oswaldo, together with Professor Calventi, were the primary drivers behind this pioneering conservation action. The sanctuary has since been expanded to include other areas and additional marine mammal species, and Oswaldo also participated in the process that led to the establishment of the Agoa sanctuary in the West Indies.

For colleagues in the Caribbean, Oswaldo was like that older brother who knows everything. His knowledge and management of the political, diplomatic and business aspects as applied to the conservation of cetaceans, in addition to his linguistic skills and camaraderie, made him everyone's friend and mentor. In our experience, few individuals have had such a positive impact on so many people, with Oswaldo's influence manifest in both personal and professional ways. A good example was a project begun on Guadeloupe to study the migration routes of humpback whales there. One of us (OA) contacted Oswaldo for help with the study. There was some nervousness about this because the project leaders had never met him or his collaborator (ASK), but they proved to be essential to the success - and morale - of the project. Following this experience, Oswaldo was invited to Madagascar to teach the project personnel there how to collect genetic samples from humpbacks; he was the originator of Cétamada's biopsy collection (now the largest genetic database in the Indian Ocean), and his transfer of skills and knowledge was particularly important.

Oswaldo impressed many conservationists in the Caribbean with his ability to connect with local communities of fishermen to make them understand the need to respect and protect marine mammals. At conferences, he was always willing to pass on his wisdom and experience to others, and his advice regarding the Dominican sanctuary was important to later efforts to establish marine mammal sanctuaries elsewhere.

The Caribbean work went back a long way. Beginning in the late 1980s, Oswaldo had begun collaborating with the humpback whale research program at the Center for Coastal Studies in Massachusetts, and he became the principal Dominican scientist in the first detailed research on humpbacks in Samaná Bay. This was followed by the ground-breaking multinational ocean-wide study, Years of the North Atlantic Humpback (YONAH), which conducted large-scale photo-identification and biopsy sampling. Oswaldo played a key role in the Dominican field work for this, and for its successor, the MONAH project, in 2004/2005. Even farther afield, he worked collecting biopsy samples of various species in Alaskan waters.

Beyond whales, Oswaldo was involved for many years in a wide variety of activities, from television production and commercial aquaculture to environmental consulting and mitigation. He was also deeply immersed in Dominican politics, and on several occasions ran on the PLD party ticket in elections for the post of Deputy. While living in Cyprus (1993-2000), he was actively involved in the rising aquaculture sector, and established his

own brown trout company (ProMar Ltd). He also worked with other Latinos in Limassol to establish the first Latino-Cypriot Association. In 2000, he returned to the DR to establish marine aquaculture in Bani Bay through various projects, which is still the area's main income source and one of its biggest development projects.

On a later trip to Cyprus in 2018, he substantially participated in work related to a better understanding of seagrasses, the underwater rainforests of the Mediterranean. In 2019, together with one of us (MIV) he organized expeditions to study hotspots of invasive seagrasses in the DR (an understudied ecosystem).

Oswaldo's three children (Marlen, Emiddio and Penelope) sometimes worked with him studying whales in the field, and he inspired them all to take up professional careers in science and architecture.

Everyone who knew Oswaldo would agree that he was one of a kind, and no one who met him ever forgot him. He was the consummate charmer and social butterfly, who would talk with anyone on the street from small children to adults of all persuasions. He had an unmatched talent for making people comfortable, and he was always the guy who made sure that everyone around him was having a good time. And never was a man more gloriously devoted to making women of all ages feel special.

In the field, he was a dynamo. He was skilled in all aspects of field work, and frequently hugely entertaining (even if his sense of punctuality was often distinctly Latin). He would sleep a few hours a night, but when he slept it was very deeply; he was at times almost impossible to awaken, and on more than one occasion someone had to literally pour cold water over him to get him to return to the living.

Oswaldo was known for his unflinching tenacity: when he was committed to a project, there was nothing he wouldn't do to see it through. As a young PhD student, one of us (ASK) was panicking on a satellite tagging study based in Guadeloupe because the weather was terrible, and the project seemed doomed to failure. Oswaldo just said "No problem, we will go to Silver Bank and put out tags, and then come back to Guadeloupe when the weather is good." None of that was part of the plan, or the budget, but he just made it happen because it was important to him, because he could, and because he was a great friend.

Oswaldo was fluent in four languages - Spanish, English, Russian, and Greek - and was accomplished at everything from martial arts to cooking to professional Latin dancing. He had a fierce intellect that was insatiably curious about everything, and he would routinely stop to enquire with complete strangers about a particular activity or thing that caught his eye.

Oswaldo's contributions to marine mammal research and conservation - in the Dominican Republic, the wider Caribbean, and beyond - are his lasting legacy. But at a personal level, he can best be described as a lovable rogue whose zest for life was unmatched; and anyone who spent time with him will treasure in their memory some truly hilarious stories. A friend who knew him put it best: "He was the guy you always hoped would show up to a party, because he'd change the energy and make it so much more fun." To say that Oswaldo Vasquez lived life large is a huge understatement: his was the definition of a life well lived, and he was a legend to those of us who knew him well.