The World Congress of Herpetology, an international non-governmental organization founded to support herpetology worldwide, held its third congress last August in Prague, Czech Republic. Previous congresses were held in Canterbury, England and Adelaide, Australia. These congresses are generally regarded as the most representative meetings of herpetologists both for number of nationalities (more than 850 representatives from 58 countries were in Prague) and scope of presented topics. Thus, they provide a platform for meetings and exchange of ideas with specialists from other fields of herpetology who usually hold separate meetings. Interdisciplinary approaches to problems through wide-ranging discussions are one of the most beneficial aspects of such large meetings. Bearing this in mind, the congresses are open, according to the Statutes of the WCH, to anyone who works in any field of herpetology or is interested in herpetology, regardless of whether they deal with extant or extinct taxa.

Two directions were followed in the course of preparation of the scientific program. The organizers preferred that the congress should be conducted along long-standing principles for scientific meetings of this kind, i.e., to enable people to present the results of their research and to discuss them with others. A free choice of what to present can reflect the range of topics and the state that each pertinent field has reached since the previous congress. Therefore, the main part of the congress consisted of contributed papers arranged in topical units (sessions in the case of talks, and topical arrangements in the case of posters). In addition, there were specialized symposia and round tables organized in advance by people who wanted to promote discussions of particular topics. The organizers’ requirement was that contributors not give just review presentations; they therefore rejected abstracts that did not contain new and original results. On the other hand, they accepted some non-orthodox papers and presentations that criticized some routine and deeply-rooted approaches and methods (e.g., cladistics, model animal approaches, etc.).

The scientific program resulted in a very colorful and multilateral presentation of a wide range of views, but at the same time showed a few dominant fields of herpetology in which herpetologists’ interests worldwide have been focused during the last decade of this century.

Undoubtedly, the principal arena of interest was the global decline of amphibian and reptile populations and related topics (impact of human activities, environmental contaminants and other possible causes of the declines, conservation biology, strategies for conservation, etc.). Of six simultaneous sections running over the whole week, one was devoted nearly completely to this topic (76 talks, plus a half-day workshop on conservation of Europe’s threatened herpetofauna organized by the Societas Europaea Herpetologica Conservation Committee and the IUCN Species Survival Group for European Herpetofauna). Similar topics were covered by 27 posters. This, together with contributions dealing with conservation biology as a “side product,” represented about 15% of all 773 papers submitted to the congress. Most of these presentations documented the degree of decline: only a few of them proposed methods and strategies to deal with declines. General concern about future developments in conservation and maintenance of the herpetofauna also was expressed in one of the resolutions addressed to many supra-national and national organizations: it specifically supported the work and perspective of the Declining Amphibian Populations Task Force.

Another dominant topic represented in the congress was evolution, associated with phylogeny and systematics. Several sessions and symposia were held during the congress that fit into this field, such as one-day sessions on “Evolution and Systematics of Anura” and “Evolution of Caudata,” a one-and-a-half day session on “Evolution and Systematics of Reptilia,” and one-day sessions on “Evolution and Systematics of Snakes” and the more specialized “Phylogeny and Systematics of the Viperidae.” Also, this part of the congress comprised about 15% of the total number of contributions, including posters.

Predictably, a number of evolutionary contributions were based on fossil material. However, paleoherpetology in general was not, contrary to expectations of the organizers, well represented in the congress. This resulted in short (but high quality) sessions on “Paleozoic Amphibia” and “Early Reptiles,” and a half-day symposium on “Mesozoic Amphibians and Reptiles.” About a dozen contributions dealt also with the post-Mesozoic fossil record of amphibians and reptiles. Nevertheless, a relatively low number of paleontological contributions can be interpreted as a fact that the wall separating paleo- and neo-herpetologists still exists, and the fact that the object of study is a fossil is more significant than that it is an amphibian or reptile.

Another “strong” field represented in the congress was ecology, especially population ecology of amphibians (altogether nearly 100 presentations). Worthy of mention in this respect were also symposia on “Climate Variation and its Impact on Herpetofauna,” “Temperature and Sex Determination in Reptilia,” and “Sea Turtles: Biology, Ecology, Management.”

There were many other topics represented to a lesser degree in the congress, such as accounts of regional herpetofaunas given in a session entitled “Zoogeography of Amphibia and Reptilia” and a similar part of the poster exhibit; they comprised about 50 presentations (about 7% of all papers submitted). However, one must also add papers presented in the symposium “Africa—The Neglected Continent: Biodiversity and Biology of the African Herpetofauna,” and others.

The scope of topics also included behavior of reptiles, calling behavior in Amphibia, growth and development (e.g., the sympo-
sium on “Neonatology of Reptiles: Character States Expressed Most Strongly Within the First Year of Life”), physiology, amphibian and reptilian venoms, reproduction, chromosomal studies, parasitology, breeding in captivity, and methods and approaches. Some pre-organized symposia (such as “The Eurasian Green Toad as a Model Species for Studies in Evolutionary Biology” and “Plasticity in Amphibian Reproduction, Development, and Evolution”) covered several topics already mentioned.

Large international meetings are also social events, and local organizers usually want to present typical cultural features of the host country. The Czech Republic is famous for its high-quality beer and classical music. Consequently, one evening gathering was held in the oldest brewery in Prague, dating back to 1496. Another night was spent on board a steamer on the Vltava River, which provided an opportunity to see the beautiful panorama of the city and its castle. However, the real highlight of the social program was the concert of old Czech music in the most famous concert hall in Prague. Long-lasting applause brought the musicians back to the stage; after the concert, people did not want to leave the concert hall, and stayed a long time on the main staircase talking in the warm summer night.

The business program included the WCH Business meeting, the International Herpetological Committee meeting and, because the European Herpetological Society was a co-organizer of the congress, also the 9th Ordinary General Meeting of Societas Europaea Herpetologica. In addition, several other committees, boards, and organizations held meetings at the congress site. Three very attractive bids for the Fourth World Congress of Herpetology were proposed and are now being considered by the Executive Committee.

In sum, the congress reflected the current state of herpetology, and enabled the assessment of advances attained in this field of science, and its current and possible future trends. Those who were not able to be in Prague at least can have the book “Herpetology ‘97,” which includes approximately 770 abstracts with the addresses of authors and a Subject Index. (See ad elsewhere in this issue of HR for ordering details.) Those who desire to become acquainted with the WCH documents (report of the Secretary General, Treasurer’s report, report of the Congress Director, WCH-3 resolutions, etc.) are invited to visit the WCH Web page at: http://www.gli.cas.cz/herpet. The site originally contained information concerning WCH-3, but will be gradually changed into a source of information about current developments in the World Congress of Herpetology, until organizers of the WCH-4 open their own Web page.

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**Herpetology ‘97**

Abstracts of the Third World Congress of Herpetology

*edited by Zbynek Roček and Scott Hart*

This new publication consists of more than 760 abstracts, submitted by authors to the Third World Congress of Herpetology. Authors from every continent and virtually all fields of herpetology are represented. Each abstract includes author’s mailing address, key words, and in many cases, information regarding where the paper will be published in full. The book also includes topically arranged contents, as well as author and subject indexes. Hence, the book provides a good review in contemporary herpetology, especially valuable to those unable to attend WCH-3 in Prague. Moreover, because it is likely that not all presented papers will be published, this book makes available a great amount of valuable information to the scientific community.

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