

Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt

co-founder of Human Ethology and the Human Ethological Film Archive, passed away on June 2nd 2018.

Eibl-Eibesfeldt was born in Vienna as the son of a botanist and an artist. He was given the, even back then unusual name Irenäus, known as Renki. Already as a child, he preferred to spend his time around ponds, in meadows and in forests observing animals rather than going to school. Nevertheless, he made it to high school (Gymnasium) and after a difficult time as a flak helper, he began studying zoology at the age of 18 at the University of Vienna in 1946. In the post-war years in Vienna, he met Konrad Lorenz and then joined the Research Centre for Comparative Behavioral Research at the Max Planck Institute for Marine Research, headed by Lorenz in 1951. In 1957, the behavioral research unit moved to Seewiesen together with the directors Erich von Holst and Konrad Lorenz and became the Max Planck Institute for Behavioral Physiology. Eibl-Eibesfeldt went to Seewiesen too, where he did his doctorate under Lorenz on the social behavior of squirrels.

In the 1950s, Eibl-Eibesfeldt met Hans Hass, a very well-known biologist at the time as well as a pioneer in scuba diving. Together they went on a long expedition, known as the “Xarifa Expedition”. Eibl-Eibesfeldt was fascinated by marine biology and continued his work in this field until around 1960. One of his discoveries was the symbiosis of cleaner fish and their hosts. In Seewiesen he studied, amongst other things, the nest-building behavior of rats and the playing behavior of mammals. The focus of his studies was innate behavior versus learned behavior. As early as 1967, the first textbook in animal ethology to date was published with the title (in accordance with his ego) “Grundriss der vergleichenden Verhaltensforschung”.

From the middle of the 1960s, he was fascinated by the idea of “human biology” and became co-founder of this field. One of his first highly regarded studies was the documentation of the non-verbal behavior of blind and deaf-born children, which showed that emotional facial expressions are innate. Eibl-Eibesfeldt quickly realised that the behavior of people in very different parts of the world was surprisingly similar. He then began to systematically document and archive human behavior, especially social behavior and emotional behavior, i.e. the everyday life of five different nations/people who were practically still living in the Stone Age: the Yanomami in

Venezuela, the San in Botswana, the Himba in Namibia, the Eipo in western New Guinea, and the Trobriander on the island of Kaileuna in Papua New Guinea. In order to actually film people's normal behavior, a special mirror optic was used so that one could film scenes unnoticed. The behavior of these people was documented over decades and, together with the written documentation of these films, forms the core of the Human Biology Archive, the Research Centre for Human Biology. In 1975, this research unit was virtually spun-off from the former MPI for Behavioral Physiology, after the directors could not agree to nominate Eibl-Eibesfeldt as director of the institute. The research unit closed following his retirement in 1996. The archives then remained more or less dormant in Seewiesen/Andechs until 2014 and were handed over by the MPG to the Senckenberg Museum in Frankfurt. However, almost right up to his death, Eibl-Eibesfeldt managed to continue funding his research with private funding.

Eibl-Eibesfeldt was ridiculed for many years as a "collector", but in the meantime his human biological works have become appreciated and his archives have a good chance of becoming a UNESCO world cultural heritage; a unique documentation of behavior, which in certain parts no longer exists, since cultures are dying out or western traditions have taken over. His biology of human behavior was summarized in a textbook "Grundriss der Humanethologie" by Eibl-Eibesfeldt himself. His most important work was the article on "Human Ethology: Concepts and implications for the sciences of man" in "Behavioral and Brain Sciences" (1979), which underpinned human ethology as a research subject. Eibl-Eibesfeldt has also interfered in politics on several occasions in the 1980s with ideas on xenophobia, alienation and solidarity in the community. Unfortunately, some of these works were used and are still being exploited by right-wing national circles for their own purposes.

Eibl-Eibesfeldt was a charismatic man, who remained fascinated by behavioral research right up into old age. He could tell many interesting and exciting stories, but one had to have a lot of time to listen, as he always liked to give a long introduction about the importance of Vienna in European history. While telling the story his face broke into a mischievous smile, and when he got lost in the story (which was usually the case), his wife Lore told him to get to the point.

We will forever cherish his memory.