



In memoriam Pieter Baas, 80 years old

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Citation: Van Welzen PC, Lut C, Lens F, et al. 2024. In memoriam Pieter Baas, 80 years old. *Blumea* 69 (1): i–x. <https://doi.org/10.3767/blumea.2024.69.01.00>. Effectively published online: 8 August 2024.



Fig. 1 Against illegal wood logging, from an article in *Leidsch Dagblad* (21 January 2017) by Leonie Groen: 'Hout: net zoveel waard als goud' ['Wood: as valuable as gold'], © Mediahuis. The wood in Pieter's hand is root-balsawood of *Alstonia spatulata* Blume (*Apocynaceae*), the portrait was painted by Carla Roodenberg and presented to Pieter on his retirement in 2005.

Within our institute, Pieter Baas was the (co)writer of most obituaries or commemorations for people turning 80 years old. And, indeed, we started to write his commemoration when we received the news that he had passed away, just one day after he turned 80, 29 April 2024. Two forms of cancer had caught up with him and ended his quality of life. Pieter was always a 'people-person', a man who liked to have people around him

and with whom he could communicate. Being isolated and alone in his apartment in Leiderdorp was not his way to enjoy life and he bravely elected to end it. With his death we lost a very dear friend, colleague, scientist and director.

From humble farming stock, Pieter Baas was born 28 April 1944. He finished his high school in Alkmaar (North Holland) in 1962, after which he studied biology at Leiden University, resulting in a Bachelor of Science degree awarded on 14 December 1965 followed by a Master of Science Degree with honours on 18 February 1969. During his MSc work he started to specialize in wood anatomy: he studied technical aspects in Delft (The Netherlands) to be followed by systematic anatomy supervised by Charles Metcalfe (1904–1991) at the Jodrell Laboratory,

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Fig. 2 PhD, with honours 18 June 1975.

Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, sponsored by a British Council Scholarship. After this Kew experience Pieter became a staunch Anglophile and never hesitated to improve people's English – even that of native speakers.

After Pieter's MSc, Professor C.G.G.J. (Cees) van Steenis (1901–1986), initiator of the Flora Malesiana Project, offered him a job as wood anatomist at the Rijksherbarium (National Herbarium). Pieter started 1 August 1969 – and never left. During his working life, the scientific wood collection developed into the largest in the world. Pieter not only studied systematic wood anatomy, but he also focused on evolutionary and ecological anatomical traits for his thesis 'Comparative anatomy of *Ilex*, *Nemopanthus*, *Sphenostemon*, *Phelline* and *Oncotheca*', which he defended in 1975 and for which he received his PhD with honours (Fig. 2). His regular scientific routine at the Rijksherbarium included writing chapters on systematic wood anatomy for plant families published in *Flora Malesiana* and, as the Rijksherbarium was part of Leiden University, teaching: Pieter was briefly involved in a five-week BSc course on plant anatomy together with staff of the Botanical Laboratory, and, throughout his career, he trained many internship students and PhD students, often resulting in lifelong friendships.



Fig. 3 Professorship, inaugural speech on 12 February 1988.

Pieter, ambitious, adventurous and enterprising, embarked on many initiatives, a few from part of his curriculum vitae being:

- From 1976 onwards Secretary of the Structural Section of the Royal Botanical Society of the Netherlands.
- 1977–1980: Vice-President of the latter Society and Chairman of the Editorial Committee of its journal *Acta Botanica Neerlandica*.
- From 1980: Chairman of BION (Foundation for Biological Research in the Netherlands) team Systematics of Mosses and Vascular Plants.
- From 1981: Member of the Van Leeuwenhoek Committee of the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences.
- From 1982: Working Party Chairman of IUFRO (International Union of Forest Research Organizations) S5.01-02 'Natural variations in wood quality'.

In 1987 Pieter became Extraordinary Professor of Systematic Plant Anatomy at Leiden University, a position financed by the Leiden University Fund. He gave his inaugural lecture 'Op het scherp van de snede' ('On the cutting edge') on 12 February 1988 (Fig. 3).

At the beginning of 1991 Pieter, rather reluctantly, succeeded Professor C. (Kees) Kalkman (1928–1998) as scientific director

of the Rijksherbarium and as professor of systematic botany at Leiden University. After negotiations with the Faculty of Sciences Pieter succeeded in obtaining funds for professional computerisation of the herbarium; before that there had been some individual computers, but now followed a newly constructed network and digitisation of the type collections (with grants from the Dutch Science Foundation), the scanning of the specimens and adding their label data in a database system (BRAHMS, <https://herbaria.plants.ox.ac.uk/bol/brahms/>). The Rijksherbarium was one of the first organisations anywhere to put its type collections on line, this ensuring participation in the Dutch branch of GBIF (Global Biodiversity Information Facility; <https://www.gbif.org/>). After the merging of all Dutch major biodiversity collections as Naturalis Biodiversity Center in 2020, the digitisation of the remaining botanical collections continued, applying a new technique as three conveyor belts were used to automatically photograph the 4 000 000 specimens.

Two years into Pieter's directorship the board of the Faculty of Sciences of Leiden University began to formulate plans for a budget cut of 50 % to the herbarium, arguing that the university should only finance the teaching and teaching-related research of the Rijksherbarium, not the collections, which, as they were of international importance, should be paid for by national and perhaps international sources. For many years Pieter fought off the cuts. Unfortunately, his negotiating position was weakened when a peer review of all biology groups in the Netherlands resulted in a very critical and negative assessment of the Rijksherbarium. As the peer committee lacked any understanding of systematics, Pieter was allowed to counter this by organising an independent peer review of the herbarium, which, just as

in a later peer of all Dutch systematic research, stressed the high quality of its research and collections.

Meanwhile the Rijksherbarium had outgrown its site and was moved to a new facility (a former ICT company) that was suitably named the 'Van Steenis Building', which, due to Pieter's initiative and connections, was officially opened by the then Queen Beatrix in 1996. Reportedly, Pieter had telephoned her father, Prince Bernhard, to see if he could mention the dire situation of the institute to the queen. The prince urged Pieter to do so. The opening was a great success (Fig. 4), the queen placing in the collection type material of ten species named after her. It appears that she subsequently convinced the Minister of Science, Culture and Education to provide financial help. As similar budget problems affected the herbaria of both Utrecht University and Wageningen University, the Ministry initiated a merger to form the (decentralised) National Herbarium of the Netherlands (NHN) with Pieter as its first director. The Ministry financed the running of the collections through an earmarked budget. As financial problems continued Pieter began discussions of merging all biodiversity collections in The Netherlands, but left the planning and execution to his successor, Professor Erik Smets, resulting in today's Naturalis Biodiversity Center in Leiden.

During Pieter's directorship new research techniques were adopted: large-scale spatial analyses became available, taxonomic results were posted online and CD-Rom, etc. Perhaps more importantly, molecular research became a possibility as the NHN, together with the Institute of Biology Leiden and the Natural History Museum in Leiden (now also part of Naturalis), established a molecular laboratory. All three participants



Fig. 4 Opening of Van Steenis building by (then) Queen Beatrix in 1996.



Fig. 5 Pieter receives his knighthood (Knight in the Order of the Lion of the Netherlands) from Mayor Lenferink, 11 October 2005, after his valedictory speech.

financed a permanent position and created research possibilities for PhD and postdoctoral research.

On 1 April 2005 Pieter retired and on 11 October gave his valedictory lecture entitled ‘Bewaarloon’ (‘Custody Fee’) in the Great Auditorium of the university (see Roos 2005). At the end of the lecture the then Mayor of Leiden, Henri Lenferink, entered and dubbed Pieter a Knight in the Order of the Netherlands Lion (Fig. 5), which was well deserved and highly appreciated by Pieter. As a farewell gift from all staff a portrait was painted by Carla Rodenberg (Fig. 1) and now hangs in a corridor in the Academy building.

After his retirement, Pieter remained scientifically active with wood anatomical research, and, among other things, providing advice, promoting discussions, and taking on editing. One of the things he greatly enjoyed was the role of ‘rector magnificus’ (head of the university) during PhD ceremonies, wearing the official chain and chairing the defence of many theses (Fig. 6). He took care to chair all defences of especially Naturalis PhD candidates and, typical of him, he would always ask a formal question, generally considered to be ‘not-done’.

International Association of Wood Anatomists

Almost up to his death, Pieter was one of the driving forces in the International Association of Wood Anatomists (IAWA). He was the Executive Secretary from 1976 till 1981. Together with Emma van Nieuwkoop (1933–2022, deskeditor in the Rijks-herbarium) he ran the IAWA Bulletin (later IAWA Journal) as editor (1980–2019). The pair had a special relationship, even discussing IAWA matters over a weekly dinner in a restaurant. Pieter was renowned as an authoritative wood anatomist, and this led to much collaborative, often international influential contributions, among others the commonly used IAWA lists to identify hardwoods and softwoods based on well-defined and illustrated wood anatomical features (IAWA Committee 1989, 2004). Pieter’s most intense collaboration was with Elisabeth Wheeler (North Carolina State University); together they published much on fossil woods. Pieter was extremely fond of Elisabeth’s Inside Wood identification website (<https://insidewood.lib.ncsu.edu/>; Wheeler et al. 2020), which he often used as he was frequently asked to identify woods for a great array of users, e.g., workers in customs, archaeology, ecology and ethnology.

Linnean Society of London

During his internship at Kew, Pieter undoubtedly visited Burlington House in Piccadilly, home of the Linnean Society of London. He became a member, always enjoying visiting London, and participated in several of the Society’s activities. Just before his death, in order to thank Pieter, the then Chief Executive of the Society, Prof. Gail Cardew wrote to him:

“On behalf of everyone at the Linnean Society – Fellows, as well as past and present staff and Council members – we would like to extend a heartfelt thank you for the extensive support you have given the Society over many years. Your contribution to the field of botany is globally recognised, and we were honoured to have awarded you the Linnean Medal in 2003. However, your personal contribution towards the Society itself extends far beyond this. We can’t thank you enough for not only by being a loyal Fellow for decades, but also for your time in support of *The Linnean*, and your incredibly impactful term on the Society’s Council during which you were a part of our ‘Unlocking the Past’ symposium and other Tercentenary celebrations. We are grateful for all of the effort you have put into our programme of events, including the organisation of conferences like that on plant species-level systematics in Leiden and the very successful day meeting on Georg Everard Rumphius. And we must also thank you for being so engaged with our medals and awards, where you have taken the time to prepare citations for – and engage with – medal winners over the years. We are indeed proud to have you as one of our honorary Foreign Fellows.”

One of Pieter’s dear friends, the artist Jan van Os (1942–2021), who made many excellent botanical drawings for Rijksherbarium publications, but always shunned public recognition, was put in the well-deserved spotlight by Pieter and nominated for one of the Linnean Society’s awards. The jury awarded Jan the prestigious Jill Smythies Medal in 2007.

Sociëteit (Club) ‘De Witte’

At the end of his career Pieter became a member of ‘Sociëteit De Witte’ (<https://societeitdewitte.nl/>), a club in The Hague, where he enjoyed its fortnightly discussion meetings. Pieter, never shy to be the focus of attention, regularly gave presentations. He nick-named the society ‘the tomato club’ as only soft drinks were served, Pieter having a preference for tomato juice. Also in The Hague was the working palace of then Queen Beatrix and Pieter would often casually remark that he would ‘dig in a fork together with her Majesty’ as if he was regularly invited to dinner.

Choirs

Pieter loved classical music. You could always hear him coming down the corridors in the herbarium, practising a recital, as he was an almost life-long member of ‘Residentie Bach Koor’ (Residence Bach Choir) in The Hague and the ‘Leiderdorps Kamerkoor’ (Leiderdorp Chamber Choir), closer to Leiden. The Bach Choir often held concerts in one of the churches in The Hague and Queen, later Princess, Beatrix and her husband often attended these. Pieter was usually positioned in the front and middle of the choir as his ever-changing facial expressions were quite entertaining (Pieter’s explanation). A few years ago, he had to resign from the choirs, a very difficult decision for him, but the quality of his voice deteriorated and he often succumbed to throat infections.



Fig. 6 Acting Rector Magnificus during the PhD defence of Roderick Bouman, 6 December 2022.

Pieter was very amiable and charismatic, friendly, though sometimes in conversation with a mean streak – charmingly laughing away such remarks, but, foremost, always generous. He loved to be in the spotlight and usually achieved this in a humorous way. Talking and discussing with him was generally a joy. Eating in restaurants and appreciating wine were major hobbies, and many guests and staff got invited, often regularly. Travelling was also pleasurable for him, visiting many foreign countries on top of his annual holiday to the Greek Islands with two good friends, largely to participate in workshops, symposia and make herbarium visits. His ecological footprint was huge, but (quoting Pieter) “trees are the very best binders of CO₂ and once a tree is up, you should leave it standing”. During a catastrophic tsunami in 2004, when he was on holiday in Sri Lanka, he saved his life by climbing a roof. This disaster made a huge impression on him and he always became emotional when talking about it. His empathy for people always showed when Pieter gave a speech during a commemoration or a funeral. Pieter liked to organise, exemplary being the annual dinner for biology pro-

fessors and lecturers with their spouses, which gave him ample opportunity to talk, deliver speeches and make a toast. Pieter was always full of initiatives and ideas, an important one being the organising of the first Flora Malesiana Symposium (held in August 1989), which due to its success, has been held every three years, alternating between Asia and Europe. Despite his extrovert gregariousness, Pieter, a confirmed bachelor, left no partner, but he made an impact worldwide and we, like many other colleagues, will remember him very dearly.

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EPONYMY

Baasia Estrada-Ruiz, Upchurch, Wheeler & Mack (fossil *Celastraceae*).
Baasoxylon Wheeler (fossil *Malvaceae*).
Ilex baasiana B.C.Stone & Kiew (*Aquifoliaceae*).
Lasianthus baasianus H.Zhu (*Rubiaceae*).

NEW TAXA OR NAME COMBINATIONS

Koehneria S.A.Graham, Tobe & Baas (*Lythraceae*).
Koehneria madagascariensis (Baker) S.A.Graham, Tobe & Baas (*Lythraceae*).
Lourtella S.A.Graham, Baas & Tobe (*Lythraceae*).
Lourtella resinosa S.A.Graham, Baas & Tobe (*Lythraceae*).

Acknowledgements Gerard Thijssse and Ingrid de Kort are thanked for their constructive comments. Thanks also to Hans Kruijer for magnificently improving the quality of the photos.

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