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Remembering Martin Hellicar, a giant of environmental conservation in Cyprus

It is with great shock that we were all informed last Sunday of the loss of one of Cyprus' foremost environmentalists, and one of SDSN Cyprus' Leadership most active Members, Dr. Martin Hellicar. Martin passed away, at the age of only 56, as a result of a tragic car accident.

Martin was best known as the Director of Birdlife Cyprus, one of the most active and successful nature conservation organisations on the island, and was considered a friend by so many of us at SDSN Cyprus. We valued him not only for his relentless efforts to protect Cyprus' wildlife (and in particular the birds, that he loved so much) and its ever-shrinking habitats, but also for his incredible optimism and sense of humour. Here at SDSN Cyprus, he was a valued founding member of our network, one of our staunchest allies for the fulfillment of the Sustainable Development Goals in Cyprus, but more importantly, a dear friend. "I first met Martin in the early 2000s, when we worked together on bi-communal conservation projects. In the ensuing decades, I was constantly inspired by how his passion for protecting the natural environment never wavered, how his optimism never waned, how he always believed that common sense would prevail, despite the so many threats facing the birds he loved so deeply. There is only one thing we can do now, and that is to be more like Martin, so that we may continue his work and honour his legacy", said Nicolas Jarraud, a fellow member of the Leadership Council of SDSN Cyprus.

For the last three decades, Martin was always at the forefront of all the key struggles to protect the natural environment, first as a journalist at the Cyprus Mail, and then as Director of Birdlife Cyprus. From the conservation of the griffon vulture to the struggle against the cruelty of illegal bird trapping, he was always on the front lines. His mission to understand and protect the natural environment was a lifelong one, reflected also in his university studies; Martin earned his PhD from the University of Cyprus with a thesis on grazing with biodiversity, preceded by ecological studies at York and Lancaster Universities in the UK (even then, his interest was in birds and their threatened habitats). His work as an academic was indeed well respected, for example his study in 2004, which identified the benefits of small-scale farming for biodiversity.

He was also a true believer in intercommunal environmental cooperation, having only recently himself written an obituary for that other great environmentalist, Martin Marancos, with whom he had first cooperated in 2001 on a bi-communal study of farmland birds. At the end of that obituary, he had written: "Cyprus' nature has lost one of its outstanding defenders, and, like everyone else who was lucky enough to work with Martin and count him as a friend, I will miss him dearly". The same words could easily be said of Martin Hellicar. Martin has flown away with his beloved birds, but we will overcome our sorrow and loss to continue his struggle.