



## **Richard Francis Feeney (1954–2021)**

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## OBITUARIES

### Richard Francis Feeney (1954–2021)

Christine E. Thacker<sup>1,2</sup>, William B. Ludt<sup>2</sup>, and Gregory B. Pauly<sup>3</sup>

**R**ICK FEENEY was the Ichthyology Collections Manager at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County (LACM) for more than 38 years until his retirement in 2019. He was known for his comprehensive collections management skills as well as his expertise in California fishes and larval fishes of all kinds. During his time at LACM, Rick oversaw the daily management, digital catalog, and loan activity for the Ichthyology collection and frequently for the Herpetology collection as well (Fig. 1). He was an integral part of the Research and Collections staff at LACM, and the Ichthyology collections would not be the same today without his exacting attention to detail, broad knowledge of fishes, and commitment to making the specimens and their data accessible to all. Rick is particularly remembered for his kindness and welcoming support of the many students and researchers who used the LACM Ichthyology collections over the course of his long career. He was beloved at the museum, always jovial and optimistic, and contributed so much to the welcoming and inclusive atmosphere in Ichthyology through the years. Rick died on May 6, 2021 after a long battle with cancer.

Rick was born on October 5, 1954 in Burbank, California, the youngest of four children and the only son of Bernard and Virginia Feeney. Rick grew up in the Burbank hills north of Los Angeles, and throughout his life he enjoyed hiking and exploring the nearby Verdugo Mountains. He learned how to catch fish as a child and that love of biology and the outdoors prompted him to study biology at the California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo. He graduated in 1978 and returned to Burbank, where he found a job at St. Joseph Hospital and met Lissette Santos, whom he married in 1979. They had their daughter Pamela in 1983 and settled down in Burbank, surrounded by his extended family. Rick went on to pursue a master's degree in biology at the University of Southern California (USC), working with Dr. Robert Lavenberg, who was then the Ichthyology Curator at LACM and an adjunct professor at USC. Rick's association with the LACM collections lasted for more than 40 years, beginning in 1978 when he first took a position sorting and identifying ichthyoplankton through a contract with Southern California Edison, administered initially by Occidental College and then transferred to USC and LACM a few months later. Rick was then hired into a permanent position at LACM as a Curatorial Assistant which later was termed Collections Manager. He completed his thesis entitled "Early Life History of the Yellowchin Sculpin *Icelinus quadriseriatus*"



**Fig. 1.** Rick Feeney with a gharial skull model in the LACM Department of Herpetology in 2011. Although Rick's specialty was ichthyology, he would also serve as Collections Manager in the Department of Herpetology when layoffs or other demands required double duty to keep both departments open to researchers. Photo by Neftali Camacho.

in 1983 and continued to curate and improve LACM's ichthyoplankton collections throughout his career. He also remained a lifelong fan of the USC football team and regularly attended games and tailgate parties with Lavenberg and his USC colleagues over the years.

In Rick's years at LACM, he would participate in moving the entire Ichthyology collection (roughly 150,000 lots in those years) twice within the museum (Fig. 2). These moves were grueling but gave Rick a deep familiarity with the

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**Fig. 2.** Christine Thacker (curator) and Rick Feeney in the LACM Department of Ichthyology collection in 2018. Early in his career at LACM, Rick was involved in moving the Ichthyology collection to the ground floor, where it has been since 1984. Photo by Neftali Camacho.

Ichthyology holdings that all the other Ichthyology staff relied upon. He had a preternatural ability to locate specimens, track down data, or find just the perfect reference needed by a colleague. He took a special interest in the Ichthyology library, and he carefully organized and cataloged (with help from Ichthyology administrative assistant Helga Schwarz and numerous students) all the books and reprints, resulting in an uncanny talent for finding even the most obscure sources. Anyone who has worked in a natural history museum knows that often the most challenging task is simply locating something that has been lost, and for that, Rick was a savant. His long experience also gave him a deep knowledge of LACM's history and inner workings, and he was generous with his advice and help in any situation.

In addition to his expertise in fish larvae, Rick carefully curated the LACM's otolith and skeletal collections. LACM's otolith holdings are primarily those collected by John E. Fitch over his long career as a biologist with the California Department of Fish and Game and are a comprehensive otolith reference collection for the northeastern Pacific. Rick

facilitated many research projects using those otoliths, including a photographic atlas of the collection (Lowry, 2011) and as part of a team using otolith carbonates to infer historical water temperatures (Ghosh et al., 2007). A variety of biologists, anthropologists, and archaeologists use the LACM skeletal and otolith collections to identify fish remains in Native American middens and in the stomachs of other animals. Rick's efforts in assisting archaeologists with identification of fish remains from sites in coastal Santa Barbara and the Channel Islands were immortalized in the short film *Fish Guys*, produced by filmmaker Trey Stokes ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kn56oKxVk\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kn56oKxVk_k)) and an associated publication (Porcasi and Andrews, 2001). In that film, the characters inspired by Rick and his co-Collections Manager Jeff Seigel are represented as laid-back, hilarious, unfailingly helpful, and incredibly knowledgeable. It's an accurate portrayal and gives a good impression of how much fun it was to work with both Rick and Jeff over the years.

Between 1997 and 2002 Rick supervised another NSF grant-funded project to digitize the entire specimen catalogs for both the Ichthyology and Herpetology collections at LACM. This project was immense and involved a battalion of work-study students from nearby USC. Rick oversaw and coordinated the effort, along with digitizing many thousands of collection records himself. Rick's experience with the Herpetology collections would prove a valuable asset when, in 2003, the curator (Dr. David Kizirian) and Collections Manager (Kent Beaman) of Herpetology were laid off due to a budgetary shortfall. Rick and Jeff Seigel took over the care of the Herpetology collections, including all the curation, cataloging, and loans of specimens. Their efforts and commitment to preserving those specimens kept them from being deaccessioned and transferred to another institution, a plan proposed as a cost-cutting effort that was vehemently opposed by Ichthyology staff along with the herpetological community. Rick's care and oversight kept the Herpetology collections safe until the Collections Manager position was filled by Neftali Camacho in 2010. Rick's ongoing careful monitoring of the collections also led to the early detection of a fungus infestation in the skeletal specimens of both Ichthyology and Herpetology, and once again Rick was instrumental in the efforts to obtain an NSF grant and decontaminate, rehouse, and update the records for the nearly 8,000 skeletal specimens across both collections (Thacker et al., 2008).

Rick's curatorial expertise spanned the gamut from the smallest eggs and larvae to the largest specimens housed in the LACM collections, including two that are currently on display in the museum's exhibit halls. In 1984, a Megamouth Shark (*Megachasma pelagios*), at that time only the second specimen known, was caught off Catalina Island and brought to the museum. Rick and his colleagues transferred (with a crane) and preserved the 1,540-pound, 14.7-foot-long shark and prepared it for display in a custom fiberglass viewing tank. In 2006, another huge fish, this time an Oarfish (*Regalecus russellii*), was stranded on Catalina Island and prepared by Rick and Jeff to be displayed in another custom tank (Fig. 3). The preservation of huge specimens such as these takes time, and in both cases Rick and Jeff (in respirators for protection from the formalin) monitored the long process, which took place outside on the museum's loading dock to ensure proper ventilation. When the Oarfish was ready, one of its long pelvic fin oars was found to be





**Fig. 3.** Jeff Seigel, Rick Feeney, and Christine Thacker (left to right) preserving the Oarfish (*Regalecus russellii*) on the museum's loading dock. This specimen is on public display at LACM. Photo by Kimball Garrett.

broken. Rick set the break using a segment of a transparent drinking straw, obtained from the cafeteria and delicately slit lengthwise, and wrapped it around the broken fin ray. Rick had a comprehensive knowledge of diverse collection management techniques and was also an expert at finding cheap, creative solutions.

Throughout his career, Rick's favorite fishes were the sculpins, and he commemorated that interest with tattoos of the Roughback Sculpin (*Chitonotus pugetensis*) and Grunt Sculpin (*Rhamphocottus richardsonii*) on his forearms (Fig. 4). His first publications were descriptions of larval development for three species of California sculpin: *Clinocottus analis*, *Icelinus quadriseriatus*, and *Orthonopias triacis* (Feeney, 1987, 1992). For those papers, he created many lovely, detailed illustrations of fish eggs and larvae. He was a skilled scientific illustrator and contributed illustrations to his own papers as well as many others (Feeney and Swift, 2008; Feeney et al., 2010). He was also known for his drawings on birthday and congratulations cards, and in his later years did all the design and layout for the yearly LACM seasonal greeting cards for Moratorium, a holiday we observe in honor of the yearly loan shipping moratorium from mid-November to early January. In 1993, Rick published his first record of an unusual fish in California waters (the Pacific Tripletail *Lobotes surinamensis* [now *L. pacificus*]; Rounds and Feeney, 1993). Rick had a tremendous knowledge of eastern Pacific fishes and a keen awareness of how distributions were changing as oceans grow warmer, including sporadic records of fishes brought north by warm El Niño events. He went on to publish a number of new fish records (Feeney, 2006; Feeney et al., 2007; Gracian-Negrete et al., 2012; Feeney and Lea, 2016, 2018; Kirsch et al., 2018), including collaborations with scientists in both North and South America.

Rick's deep knowledge of California fishes formed an integral part of his last great project, his extensive contributions to the revised edition of the classic resource for California fishes, *Guide to the Coastal Marine Fishes of California* (Miller and Lea, 1972). This ambitious undertaking involved major revisions to the records, illustrations, and text of the guide and was based heavily on specimens from the LACM Ichthyology collection. Every month for years, Rick would pull an assortment of jars for whichever group



**Fig. 4.** Rick Feeney was especially fond of sculpins, and expressed his enthusiasm for the group with tattoos of the Roughback Sculpin (*Chitonotus pugetensis*) and Grunt Sculpin (*Rhamphocottus richardsonii*) on his forearms. Photo by Christine Thacker.

was being reviewed that month and transport them to the Cabrillo Marine Aquarium in San Pedro, where he and local colleagues would spend the day examining fishes, debating characters, and carefully updating each species account. This group, the Southern California Association of Ichthyological Taxonomists and Ecologists, was led by Cabrillo Aquarium biologist Juli Passarelli. Their effort culminated in the 2020 publication of the second edition of the guide (Love and Passarelli, 2020), already a celebrated and indispensable reference. This project also exemplifies Rick's efforts to build connections with other Southern California ichthyologists and to promote use of the LACM collections. Rick retired from LACM in 2019, but even in retirement he would regularly reach out to Bill Ludt (Assistant Curator of Ichthyology, started in 2019) and Todd Clardy (Collections Manager of Ichthyology, started in 2020) to check in and see how he could help and how the collection was doing. Before Rick retired, he prepared a manual and guide to the LACM fishes collection and procedures so that the new staff would have the benefit of his many years of knowledge and expertise.

Over the years at LACM, Rick also gave public tours, participated in exhibit planning and design, and welcomed many hundreds of visitors and students into the collection. In the late 2010s, he volunteered to participate in an exchange of students from Glendale Community College, mentoring and guiding more than 50 students in various collection and research projects on fishes. With their help, Rick was able to upgrade the storage of more than 1,700 irreplaceable large fish and shark specimens collected by Boyd Walker of the University of California, Los Angeles in the 1960s in the eastern Pacific from fragile, disintegrating plastic drums into modern steel tanks. Several of the students so greatly enjoyed working with Rick that they came back after their class semester to volunteer. He was truly dedicated to encouraging the next generation of researchers, as anyone who interacted with him at American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists's (ASIH) meetings over the years will attest. Rick was an ASIH member throughout his career and served for many years on the Collections Committee where



**Fig. 5.** Rick Feeney, Pamela Feeney, Manny Feeney, and Lissette Feeney (left to right) in Scotland on July 10, 2013 for Pamela and Manny's wedding.

he put his decades of experience to use helping other collections professionals. He loved attending the annual ASIH meetings, often presenting posters on the various collection projects on which he had been working and always enjoying the opportunity to catch up with friends and colleagues.

Over his life, Rick's family were his solid foundation and his greatest joy. Rick and Lissette had a long, loving marriage that lasted until Lissette's death in 2015. In addition to their daughter Pamela, in the early 1980s Rick and Lissette took in their niece and nephew, Kandra and Chad Buntrakulsuk, and raised all the children together as siblings. Rick's family life was happy and he once remarked that the thing he was most proud of was his blended family. Rick was a father figure to his son-in-law Manny, so much so that when Manny and Pamela were married in 2013 (Fig. 5), Manny chose to change his name to Feeney rather than Pamela changing her name. The family shared a love of the LA Dodgers, camping, and especially travel. When the kids were young, Rick and Lissette took the whole family on road trips, stopping at national parks along the way. In later years Rick and his family visited Iceland, Ireland, most of mainland Europe, and had an epic trip across New Zealand.

After a long battle with cancer, Rick passed away on May 6, 2021, peacefully at home with his beloved family. He is survived by his daughter Pamela, son-in-law Manny, niece Kandra Buntrakulsuk, nephew Chad Buntrakulsuk, and sister Joan Martin. He was predeceased by his wife Lissette and sisters Marianne Gotwals and Carol Chappell. He is greatly missed by all who knew him.

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