



IN MEMORIAM

Prof. Dr. ANDREJ MIHEVC

(1952-2024)

Geographer, speleologist, and karstologist



(Photo: Nadja Zupan Hajna)

Our dear friend and colleague, Prof. Dr. Andrej Mihevc, passed away in October 2024 after a long battle with an incurable illness. Andrej was widely known in Slovenia and internationally for his passion and remarkable contributions to cave and karst science.

Andrej was born in Logatec, a town situated in the Classical Karst region. His fascination with caves began early, during his teenage years, when he joined the local caving club. He explored caves near his hometown and developed a profound interest in the enigmatic Reka River beneath the Kras Plateau. He was among the initiators of renewed explorations in Kačna Jama, which led to the groundbreaking discovery of the Reka River passage in 1972.

Andrej's curiosity led him to explore various regions of the Dinaric Karst, from the Kras Plateau to the high karst of Trnovski Gozd and beyond. He led numerous expeditions, including a memorable 1988 excursion to the caves of the Dinaric Karst, which remains legendary among cavers. His international ventures included leading a 1995 expedition to Guizhou, China.

He also played a crucial role in organizing and pro-

moting speleology in Slovenia and beyond. As one of the founders of the Anthron Karst Research Society in 1989 and president of the Speleological Association of Slovenia (1994–1996), he left a deep mark on the field. Within the International Union of Speleology (UIS), he served as Adjoint Secretary from 2001 to 2009, helping establish its permanent address at the Karst Research Institute ZRC SAZU in Postojna. He was instrumental in organizing numerous conferences and served on the editorial board of *Naše Jame* (Our Caves), Slovenia's premier caving journal.

While attending high school in Postojna, Andrej began collaborating with the Karst Research Institute, sparking a lifelong pursuit of karst research. He completed his studies in geography under the mentorship of academician Ivan Gams with an award-winning thesis on the *Rovte Karst*. Joining the Karst Research Institute in 1980, Andrej's research on contact karst earned him a Master's degree and research on speleogenesis of the Škocjan Caves and Divača karst region a PhD degree.

Andrej soon realized that the karst surface and underground are evolutionarily inseparable and must be

studied as such. His profound understanding of karst and unmatched sense of observation enabled him to identify and recognize the importance of unroofed caves (Mihevc 1996; Mihevc & Zupan Hajna 1996; Mihevc et al., 1998), laying the foundation for a new understanding of karst evolution.

While investigating the age of unroofed caves and karst landscapes, Andrej made a groundbreaking discovery: the first fossil remains of the cave-dwelling tube worm *Marifugia cavatica* in an unroofed cave within the Črnotiče Quarry. His relentless curiosity and sharp observational skills also led to other remarkable findings, including the discovery of the first black olm (*Proteus anguinus parkelj*) in Dobljče, Bela Krajina, in 1986, as well as 7,000-year-old Neolithic cave drawings in Bestažovca Cave.

Andrej viewed caves as multifaceted scientific challenges. He was captivated by their formation and development, sediments, archaeology, fauna, climate, utilization, and the impact of human activity on both caves and the broader karst environment.

He was equally intrigued by the karst surface, which he perceived as a dynamic interaction between geological structures and karstification processes. A particular focus of his lifelong research was the study of solution dolines and ice caves. One of his final projects, conducted with his son Rok, involved identifying dolines across Slovenia using a machine learning algorithm. This innovative approach provided new insights into doline distribution and resulted in the creation of an open-access database (Mihevc & Mihevc, 2021, www.dolines.org), a resource invaluable for research and conservation efforts.

Andrej was a lecturer at the University of Ljubljana, where his passion for karst studies inspired numerous students. He mentored many geography graduates and PhD candidates, as well as PhD candidates in Karstology at the University of Nova Gorica. He was among the key contributors to the Slovenian Cave Act, UNESCO nominations, and cave protection policies.

His contributions were recognized with numerous awards, including the Silver Plaque of the Slovenian Geographical Association (1997) and the Golden Plaque of the Slovenian Speleological Association (2022). That same year, he was named a "Distinguished Researcher" by ZRC SAZU.

Andrej's warmth, humor, and unrelenting curiosity endeared him to colleagues, students, and friends worldwide. He was a storyteller, an inspiring leader, and a tireless advocate for karst science.

Andrej had an unparalleled ability to ignite enthusiasm for the Karst, not only among those already passionate about it but even among the uninitiated. From the very beginning, he was the heart and soul of the International Karst School, an event that, for over thirty years, has brought together more than a hundred karstologists annually from around the globe. Many participants attended specifically to experience the exceptional and, sadly, now unrepeatably excursions through the Classical Karst that Andrej led. Following one of these schools, Andrej and a group of the world's leading karstologists extended their journey across the entire Dinaric Karst, a region where he was undoubtedly the foremost expert and ambassador.

A day in the field with Andrej was always concise, inspiring, and—without fail—exhausting. He shared an endless stream of information and reflections, not just about the Karst but about anything that captured his ever-curious mind. At the Institute, passing by his office—whether intentionally or not—almost always led to a conversation and a passionate explanation of whatever was captivating him at the moment. These discussions would inevitably expand to include related topics, as he raised questions, shared his views with infectious enthusiasm, and—with raised eyebrow—awaited counterarguments.

Even as illness limited his mobility, he continued to work, completing his last projects with the support of his wife, Bibijana, and son, Rok.

His most recent contribution among over 30 papers published in *Acta Carsologica* was a study on ice caves in Trnovski Gozd (Mihevc, 2021).

His passing leaves a profound void in the karstological and speleological community, but his legacy will continue to inspire future generations. Andrej will be remembered not only for his extraordinary scientific achievements but also for the friendships, laughter, and boundless enthusiasm he shared with everyone who had the privilege to know him.

Rest in peace, Andrej.

Franci Gabrovšek & Nadja Zupan Hajna