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Obituary – Sven Laufeld 1939–2023

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Published in:
The Palaeontological Association Newsletter

2024

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Bergstrom, S. M., Liljedahl, L., Schmitz, B., Grahn, Y., Lilljequist, R., & Ahlberg, P. (2024). Obituary – Sven Laufeld 1939–2023. *The Palaeontological Association Newsletter*, *116*, 92-93.

Total number of authors:
6

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Download date: 13. Nov. 2026

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Reminder: The deadline for copy for Issue no. 117 is 30th September 2024.

On the Web: <**http://www.palass.org/**>

ISSN: 0954-9900

Number 116, 2024

Sven Laufeld
1939 – 2023

Sven Laufeld in 2017. Photo by Robert Liljequist.

Sven Laufeld was an outstanding natural scientist who was deeply involved in research on Silurian microfossils from Gotland, Sweden. Furthermore, over a span of 35 years, he worked on a unique compilation of natural disasters that covered the period from the earliest historical documents up to recent times.

Sven was born in the city of Helsingborg in Sweden, where he spent his childhood and early school years. In 1960 he started university studies, first in zoology and geography at Lund University, before continuing his university studies with historical geology and palaeontology at the same university. For his Ph. Lic. degree, he presented a thesis on a group of organic microfossils (chitinozoans) from the Upper Ordovician of central Sweden. This pioneering work was followed by a very comprehensive PhD dissertation on Silurian chitinozoans from the island of Gotland, which was published in 1974. He understood the importance of detailed descriptions and correctly given sample levels from the study sections. Using this information, the biostratigraphical value of chitinozoan species could be clarified. Sven was also one of the first in the world to illustrate his fossils by means of SEM, and one of the first to discuss their ecology based on a broad analysis of contemporary fossils and sediments. He interpreted a bathymetric control of the chitinozoans and considered them to have been zooplankton. He found no evidence for a protozoan affinity and felt it to be more likely that these fossils were egg cases of some group of marine organisms such as Gastropoda or Polychaeta.

During his years on Gotland he was director of the Allekvia Research Station, where he created the Anders Martinsson Library, the most complete collection of literature on Silurian geology and palaeontology in Sweden. During these years he was invited to become one of 20 members of Collegium Palynologicum Scandinavicum, and to be a voting member of the International Working Group on the Ordovician–Silurian boundary of the International Union of Geological Sciences. Also, in 1971–1975, he was a member of the International Subcommission of Chitinozoa of the Commission International des Microflores Paléozoïque (CIMP), and became its chairman in 1973.

After receiving his PhD degree, Sven accepted an invitation from The Ohio State University in the USA for a year-long post-doctoral fellowship. His stay at this very large university provided him with not only global geological education but also the opportunity to participate in extensive geological fieldwork in several parts of North America. He often expressed the desire to continue his career in

North America, but suitable job opportunities were scarce. He finally accepted a one-year position at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Although he enjoyed his job and had the opportunity to stay longer, he felt the climatic conditions during much of the year were too harsh, and he returned to Sweden, where he was employed by the Geological Survey as Director of the Museum, first in Stockholm and later, after the transfer of the Survey, in Uppsala.

In 1981, he was elected member of the Faculty Evaluation Committee of the PhD dissertation by Florentin Paris at the Université de Rennes, France. In this dissertation a new chitinozoan genus, *Laufeldochitina*, was introduced, and a species of this genus is now used in the chitinozoan standard zone classification of the Ordovician system. In the same year, Sven was elected Fellow of the Explorers Club, one of the most exclusive clubs in the world. He also became a member of the Royal Physiographic Society in Lund in 1993, and received an award from the Geological Society of Sweden for his efforts to popularize geology to the Swedish public.

In 1986 he was offered a job at Swedish Geological International AB and accepted. The position was to serve as an advisor to the government of Indonesia and he spent four years in Bandung, on West Java. Indonesia is rich in volcanoes, some of which are located close to Bandung, and Sven increased his interest in and knowledge about volcanic gases and volcanism in general. This is shown by the fact that he became a member of the International Commission on crater lakes in 1999.

In June 1992 Sven was appointed to the position of Director of Malmö Museum. He was full of ideas of how to increase the public interest in museums and related fields. Unfortunately, his creative ideas were not accepted by the political board of the Malmö Museum, which wanted to make all the decisions. Sven felt that this was non-negotiable, and it resulted in his resigning and moving to his summer home at Brekille near Munka-Ljungby in southern Sweden. Sven's compilation of a huge amount of data on all types of natural events and disasters started in 1987, speeding up after his exit from the position at Malmö Museum. In May 2023 his data collection, called OVERKILL, occupied more than 12,700 pages (see <**www.naturalhazardsgroup.com**>).

A list of Sven's publications includes eight books and more than 225 other publications. About one hundred of these were popular articles in magazines and daily newspapers. Sven was an outstanding educator and both students and other readers were immediately captivated by what he had to say. Not surprisingly, he was a popular general science lecturer in his home region around Brekille.

On his pension, Sven spent many of his retirement winters in Thailand and Laos, where the climate eased his rheumatism. He continued his scientific interest in natural event activities there, based on studies in local libraries as well as using online information. He returned from Laos to his home in Brekille in late May 2023, where he tragically died on 24th May.

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