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In Memoriam: Joseph Slowinski 1960-2001

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Source: *Selbyana*, 2001, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2001), p. 180

.Published by: Marie Selby Botanical Gardens Inc

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41760094>

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## IN MEMORIAM: JOSEPH SLOWINSKI 1960–2001



*The following e-mail was received by Selbyana from Yangon, Myanmar (Burma), on 13 September 2001, and concerns the death of prominent California Academy of Sciences herpetologist Joseph Slowinski. He is shown with a snake given to him by a villager a day before the tragedy.*

This is to inform you—although you already may have heard through U.S. Consulate reports to the California Academy of Sciences, based on radio reports relayed from our team while in the field—of the tragic death of Joe Slowinski from the bite of a multi-banded krait (*Bulgaris multicinctus*) at the village of Rat Baw in a remote site in northern Myanmar (Burma).

After an exhausting week (during which we walked more than 60 miles across terrain so thick with leeches that the puddles we passed through sometimes became tinged red with blood), Joe was bitten on September 11 at 7 am. I was standing beside him when he casually picked up the pencil-thin, foot-long snake—which he did on the assumption that it was a nontoxic mimic *Lycodon*, an assumption based on the fact that the snake had reportedly already bitten the Burmese assistant, who caught it the day before. Joe immediately recognized his mistake but could detect no abrasions on his finger. He sat down to breakfast, lay down by 7:30, and reported a tingling in his muscles by 8 am. At 8:15, two assistants were sent to run to the nearest town with a radio, 8 miles distant. Joe calmly outlined what might happen to him and what we should do. Through the morning, his voice was reduced to a slur, and in time he could only write us messages. By 1:30 pm, he could no longer breathe on his own, and we began mouth-to-mouth procedures. These stretched on continuously for nearly 26 sandfly-infested hours—during the tragedy at the World Trade Center, which we only learned about yesterday. At 3 pm our runners returned to us with a request from the military for updated information before a helicopter could be sent. Fresh runners were sent back, again urgently requesting a helicopter. By evening, the weather turned too bad for a rescue flight, and the rains continued through the next day. By 4 am, Joe could no longer signal us with his big toe. By 12:25 pm, Joe's heart had stopped, and we began 3 hours of CPR in anticipation of a rescue helicopter that never was able to land.

His official time of death is 12:25 pm on the 12th. Airlift was only possible the following afternoon. At the request of his family, Joe's remains were cremated today. Several researchers are still deep in the field at this time.

Everyone respected Joe, and several present clearly loved him dearly. The trip had been very successful for Joe, with new species of snakes and lizards. He was proud of his work in Myanmar and especially of his research team there. He was brave throughout his struggle and calm to the end.

—Mark W. Moffett