

Other lives

Stephan Harding

Ecologist, teacher and co-founder of Schumacher College, Devon, with a focus on Lovelock's Gaia theory
My friend and colleague Stephan Harding, who has died aged 71, was a scientist, ecologist and teacher. At the heart of his work lay his deep feeling for the Earth and his belief in the planet as a living intelligence.

As teacher and resident ecologist, he was one of the co-founders of Schumacher College, a progressive institution for ecological studies created in 1991 as part of Dartington Hall Trust in Totnes, Devon. One of the first people to be invited to teach there was James Lovelock, the originator of Gaia theory, that is, the idea that the Earth, or Gaia, is a self-regulating organism, in which all living things define the conditions conducive for life on Earth.

Meeting Lovelock was the moment when Stephan's career began in earnest. They collaborated on the understanding of the Earth as Gaia, including working on Daisyworld, a simulation that models the plausibility of Gaia theory.

However, Stephan also took Gaia beyond Lovelock's original description of a self-regulating planet, telling the story in his book *Animate Earth* (2006) of Gaia as a living intelligence, thus reclaiming the ancient idea of *Anima Mundi*. Nevertheless throughout he held firmly to his identity as a natural scientist, aiming to broaden rather than contradict science.

His parents, Severin Zilberman and Estera (nee Weindling), were of

Polish-Jewish descent, meeting in Palestine after fleeing Poland and Nazi persecution. They moved to Caracas, Venezuela, where Severin established a successful business, and Stephan was born.

Estera died when he was three, and the family relocated to West Hampstead, north London, when Stephan was six. Severin later changed their surname to Harding.

Stephan went to William Ellis grammar school in Gospel Oak, going on to study zoology at Durham University. Graduating in 1975, he did fieldwork in studying mammals in the Llanos area of Venezuela, funded by the Smithsonian Institution.

After a PhD at St Peter's College, Oxford, he was appointed visiting professor at the National University in Costa Rica in 1984, helping to establish a master's course in wildlife management that has been influential in saving the red macaw among other species.

Stephan was an extraordinary teacher. He translated complex

ideas into vivid images. Experiential activities such as the Deep Time Walk - a three-mile trail originally along the Devon coast that takes the participant through the 4.6bn-year history of the planet - gave students a view of their place on Earth.

With the biologist Brian Goodwin, Stephan also established the MSc in holistic science in 1998, accredited by Plymouth University. It was unique, presenting a new way of practising science that recognises the scientist's participation in the natural world. However, Schumacher College's degree courses came to a close in August, when the Dartington Hall Trust said that it could not provide funding.

Stephan had a daughter, Victoria, from a relationship with Eva Bastiansen. He met Julia Ponsonby at Schumacher in 1991; they married in 2001 and had a son, Oscar.

Stephan suffered for several years from Crohn's disease and latterly from aggressive lymphoma.

Julia and his children survive him.

Peter Reason



Harding developed the Deep Time Walk, a three-mile trail originally along the Devon coast that takes people through the 4.6bn-year history of the planet