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Preface

Enchytraeidae, also known as potworms, are a family of oligochaete annelids widely distributed in terrestrial soils and shallow water sediments of the whole world. Being remote relatives and ecological counterparts of earthworms, they are playing an important role in the cycling of matter and energy in the uppermost soil layers. Their small size is compensated for by their high abundance (often tens and hundreds of thousands per square metre) and a large body surface in relation to individual biomass, which results in a high feeding and respiration activity. Some species have been cultivated en masse as fish food, both for small aquarial fishes and for the fry incubated in hatcheries. Some species have been successfully included in the standard tests of soil assessment in recent decades. Faunistic diversity of enchytraeids is still underestimated in Europe and greatly unknown in most other regions, due to inconspicuous species characters demanding special training and often also a study of live specimens. Beginning from 1994, biannual international symposia of experts in Enchytraeidae have been held in different European countries (Austria, 1994; Hungary, 1996; Germany, 1998; Denmark, 2000; The Netherlands, 2002).

The Sixth International Symposium on Enchytraeidae was held in the Võrtsjärv Limnological Station of the Estonian Agricultural University (Rannu, Tartumaa, Estonia) on 16–18 May 2004. Twenty-three oral and poster reports were presented and discussed by 18 enchytraeid experts from 12 European countries (Austria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany, the United Kingdom, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Russia, The Netherlands, Turkey). The topics covered systematics, faunistics, ecological studies in field and laboratory, restoration of natural communities, and the use of enchytraeids as test and indicator organisms in ecotoxicology. The sessions were followed by a faunistic workshop on 19–20 May. The workshop included collecting tours to the Alam-Pedja Nature Reserve, to Karula National Park, and to shores of Lake Võrtsjärv. The samples were studied alive in the Limnological Station. The workshop greatly increased the knowledge of the faunistic diversity of Enchytraeidae in Estonia.

The present issue of the *Proceedings of the Estonian Academy of Sciences* includes a part of the materials presented on this Symposium, as well as a longer paper with the results of the faunistic workshop. The subtitle *Newsletter on Enchytraeidae* No. 9 demonstrates the continuity of meetings of enchytraeidologists, first organized as workshops mainly in Germany, and the aperiodical collections connected with the similar symposia held by enchytraeid experts.

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