



SOCIETY ACTIONS

Awards

EMINENT ECOLOGIST AWARD



Frances C. James

The Eminent Ecologist Award recognizes a senior ecologist for sustained and distinguished contributions to both science and society. It is not clear, however, that being labeled "eminent" is an accolade to be eagerly sought, since it may conjure up images of a quiet scientific life of reflection on past accomplishments and a retirement from the battlefield. Fortunately, the 1997 awardee, Frances C. James, is testimony to the fact that one may be eminent and vigorously innovative at the same time. Indeed, Fran James' career and contributions seem still to be accelerating, although she is at a stage when most of us would be inclined to rest on our repu-

tations. This is all the more remarkable because Fran did not have the luxury of an orthodox, straight and narrow path to academic success. Instead, she raised a family and then earned her Ph.D., approximately at the age of 40.

Fran James' academic contributions are distinguished by a level of critical and clear thinking that sets her apart from most of her colleagues. For instance, in the early 1990s several scientific and popular articles warned of a horrendous general continental decline in migratory songbirds, announcing "empty skies." Using exactly the same data set that sparked these pronouncements of ecological disaster (i.e., the North American Breeding Bird Survey), James and McCulloch showed that there is no solid evidence of such a general decline, but that in certain regions, some species were, in fact, in trouble. Moreover, her analysis was clever enough to uncover mechanistic hypotheses that might explain the selected declines she identified in Eastern North America. This was unpopular work, and was mercilessly criticized by referees who let their environmental zeal get the better of their scientific judgement. Of course, all of Professor James' contributions have not been so charged with controversy. Her work on phenotypic plasticity in birds is widely appreciated as one of the best demonstrations of the extent to which geographic morphological variation can be nongenetic. More generally, Fran's development of approaches for disentangling size and

shape has been very influential on more than a decade of ensuing work regarding geographic variation in bird morphology. Her trademark in all of this is statistical rigor, a knack for defining problems in a way that allows statistics to illuminate rather than obfuscate, and the ability to write beautifully clear prose.

Fran's incisive mind has illuminated much more than academic debates. Her service on three important NRC committees was essential in producing reports on the Hawaiian Crow, on the Department of Interior's plans for biomonitoring, and on the Alaska predator control controversy. In all these NRC panels, Fran elevated the quality of the resulting reports with her intelligence and unfailingly high standards. This service in the conservation arena has been recognized by The Nature Conservancy, which recently elected Fran to their national Board of Governors (one of only a handful of scientists on this board). She has also served on the World Wildlife Fund's Board of Directors, as well as several local conservation and resource management advisory boards.

Fran is also a visionary in her appreciation for science's need to establish a working relationship with the public and address policy issues with courage and honesty. Long before it became trendy to spread the word about conservation, Fran was judging high school science fairs, advising boy scouts about making bird houses, and being interviewed on television about waterfowl. She was the driving

force behind the establishment of the population biology panel at the National Science Foundation. As president of the AIBS, Fran has initiated a national study of habitat conservation plans and their adequacy in the context of science aimed at endangered species protection. One of Fran's supporting letters eloquently describes her approach: "she is a very hard-nosed scientist, sticks carefully to the data, and avoids storytelling like the plague."

When you see the world as clearly and honestly as does Professor James, you need a wicked sense of humor.

This she has in abundance. Humor, dedication, generosity, and intelligence have come together in Fran James to produce one of ESA's best scientists. Fran has always avoided the spotlight and shunned attention, and as a result is not as widely known as her accomplishments and public service would warrant. She is finally beginning to get the recognition she deserves, and this Eminent Ecologist Award is only the beginning of Professor James' ascent into the sort of spotlight we reserve for our best scientists. Those who know Fran personally are especially pleased that she

has won this award, probably more than she herself is, because we know how unselfish she is, and how little she cares about acclaim. Fran just does good science, and important science. That is enough for her, and it certainly warrants this award.

Eminent Ecology Subcommittee

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