

James A. MacMahon, President 1997–1998

In writing a biographical sketch of Jim MacMahon, one is torn between emphasizing the workaholic who accomplishes in his typical 18–20 hour day what it takes most of us 2–3 times as long to do, or spotlighting the bon vivant gourmet cook in his professionally equipped kitchen, connoisseur of fine wines, and classical-music devotee with CD-lined walls of his rec room. Either way, the magnitude of accomplishment forces one to become encyclopedic.

The brash precocity, known to all of us who are acquainted with Jim, obviously surfaced early. He became Curator of Reptiles at the Dayton [Ohio] Museum of Natural History at the tender age of 14, published his first peer-reviewed paper and became Curator of Reptiles at the Michigan State University Museum at 18. Following his B.S. in Zoology at MSU in 1960, he was offered an Assistant Professorship at the University of Dayton at age 24, one year before finishing his Biology Ph.D. at Notre Dame in 1964.

During his 1963–1971 stint on the faculty at Dayton, this Midwesterner became enamored of desert ecology, began research in the Sonoran Desert, and from 1968–1971 served as Associate Director of the NSF Institute of Desert Biology at Arizona State University.

It was in these latter years that I first met Jim at a desert conference. We were just in the process of developing the administrative structure of the Desert Biome Project of the U.S. International Biological Program. Impressed, I asked Jim to join the Biome as Assistant Director and accept a faculty appointment in the Biology Department at Utah State University.

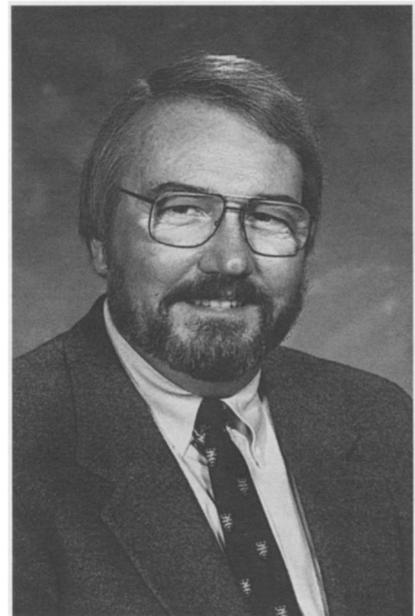
Since arriving at USU in 1971, Jim has thoroughly put to rest several shibboleths about academicians. One is the adage about a man being without honor in his own land. Jim's scientific accomplishments have been well recognized in the state. He was

awarded the first Annual Governor's Medal for Excellence in Science and Technology (1987), the University's [Research Vice President] Wynne Thorne Research Award (1988), and the Utah Academy of Arts, Science, and Letters Distinguished Service Award. He has been tabbed for several governor's committees and boards including the Governor's Advisory Council on Science and Technology.

Another MacMahon-dashed stereotype is the one that says deeply involved researchers don't have the talent, interest, or commitment to be effective teachers. He has always insisted on doing his share of the teaching, even in recent years when heavily loaded with administrative duties. Offering such courses as herpetology, mammalogy, general ecology, and animal communities, he is an extremely popular teacher on campus. He has won all of the institution's teaching awards: Professor of the Year in the College of Science (1980), Faculty Honor Lecturer in Science (1983), and nominated by the University honors students to present the distinguished Last Lecture (1991).

And as though these two contradictions were not enough, he has firmly challenged the cliché that traits that make a good scholar are different from those that make an effective administrator. Jim was appointed Head of the Biology Department in 1985 and turned around a program that needed to upgrade standards, add quality faculty, and develop a sense of direction and optimism. Four years later he was appointed Dean of the College of Science, a position he now holds in one of the largest colleges on campus. And his Provost has no reservation (nor does Jim, for that matter) about stating that Jim logged the highest score the Provost has seen around the country on a national instrument used to evaluate deans.

So MacMahon has excelled in his



own land. But ESA members are more familiar with his national achievements. He has served on numerous journal editorial boards and on panels and advisory boards of NSF, NASA, NAS/NRC, and the Jet Propulsion Lab. Most recently he has joined the NBC Board on Environmental Studies and Toxicology, and of course this year has moved from President-Elect to the Presidency of ESA.

Jim's research interests have explored an extensive, multidimensional space. Although reptiles and amphibians were clearly his early (and continuing) love, he has published on such other taxa as spiders, small mammals, birds, ants, grasshoppers, flowering plants, and fungi. His investigations have transected this array of taxa with most of the levels of biological organization, ranging from the ecophysiology of herptiles and spiders to community and ecosystem questions. And all of this has been pursued in several biotic types: warm deserts, shrubsteppe, montane and alpine zones, and wetlands. His work has been heavily empirical and field oriented, but he has pondered such abstract concepts as

guilds, life zones, and community structure.

It is in the latter, the structure and development of communities, that MacMahon has found the greatest intellectual challenge. A major fraction of his publications address succession theory and mechanisms, especially the role of animals, in desert, forest, and montane systems. Ecological recovery on Mount St. Helens was made to order for him, as is the application of succession theory to speeding the restoration of human-disturbed land. A large, interdisciplinary project on restoration of coal mine lands in southeastern Wyoming was a

major factor in contributing to his reputation in restoration ecology.

Through all of this range of interests, and at whatever the level of biological organization, the role of individual organisms is seldom very far in the background of Jim's thinking. "A Day in the Life of a Seed"; mapping all the plants on a Sonoran Desert bajada; taking apart a mesquite (*Prosopis juliflora*) tree almost splinter by splinter; "An organism-centered approach to some community and ecosystem concepts"; hand-planting thousands of individual plants in experimental restoration of disturbed mine land; the role of small

mammals in distributing fungal spores.

And this penchant for breadth and the concrete is reflected in the versatility of his private life. Whether it is flying single-engine planes, photography, automotive repair, fly fishing, or with his wife Patty canoeing and entertaining, Jim likes new challenges and excels at whatever he undertakes. ESA is in capable hands this year.

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