

## RESOLUTION OF RESPECT

**Robert Ervin Coker**

**1876-1967<sup>1</sup>**

The death of Robert Ervin Coker in his ninety-second year on October 2, 1967, at his home in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, brought to a close a life of distinction in science that was dedicated to the service of scholarship to his university, and to mankind. He left an indelible mark as teacher and writer, as organizer of new endeavors, and as a leader among a nation of scholars.

As an undergraduate he earned membership in Phi Beta Kappa, and was graduated from the University of North Carolina with a Bachelor of Science degree in 1896 and a Master of Arts degree in 1897. After four years of public school instruction, he entered the Graduate School of Johns Hopkins University to start work for the doctoral degree. From 1902 to 1904, while still a graduate student, he held the position of "biologist" at Beaufort, N.C.

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted with permission from the *J. Elisha Mitchell Scientific Society* 84: 332-337.

for the North Carolina Geologic Survey. In this capacity he conducted an oceanographic survey of winds, tides, currents, and the multiplicity of factors related to growth and productivity of marine life in the sounds and estuaries of the North Carolina coast. Fundamental data from this research were used to demonstrate that commercial shellfish could be grown in abundance. On the basis of these data changes were suggested for existing state laws governing oyster culture and the North Carolina General Assemblies of 1905 and 1907 passed legislation that has permitted a thousand-fold increase in harvest from North Carolina's marine resources.

After receiving the Ph.D. degree from Johns Hopkins University in 1906 Robert Coker declined a post-doctoral fellowship at Hopkins to accept an appointment by the Peruvian Government to investigate the decline in nitrate productivity of its coastal islands. He brilliantly met the unparalleled challenge to analyze the complex interrelationships between organism and environment that were responsible for Peruvian nitrate production and made recommendations for conservation that are still the valid basis for laws that have assured nitrate harvest without depletion. This advice was based on a thorough recognition and understanding of the ecological components in the food-chain of productivity that begins with microscopic plants in the mineral-rich antarctic waters of the Humboldt current that sweep the coast of Peru, and ends with sea birds in countless thousands from prehistoric times that have fed on schools of fish and have deposited their guano wastes at rookeries and nesting grounds on the coastal "bird" islands of Peru. Adoption of his recommendations resulted in a three-fold increase in the number of sea birds and a five-fold increase in nitrate production.

From 1910-15, he directed the Fairport, Iowa U.S. Fisheries Biological Laboratory. In 1915 he returned to Washington, D.C. and served for seven years as Chief for the Division of Scientific Inquiry in the Bureau of Fisheries. During the last two of these years he was Director of the U.S. Fisheries Laboratory at Woods Hole, Mass. He also served as Chairman for the International Marine Fisheries Commission, 1920-22.

In 1922, at the age of forty-six, he resigned as Director of Fisheries and began a second career of distinction as Professor of Zoology at the University of North Carolina. At Chapel Hill, one hundred and eighty miles from the coast, problems of fresh-water biology gradually gained ascendancy, and Robert Coker became an expert on the plankton of ponds and streams and soon gained international recognition as an expert on the copepod crustaceans.

In 1935 Robert Coker was appointed Chairman of the Department of Zoology, a position he held for twenty years until his retirement in 1947. In the years of his chairmanship in Zoology, he also achieved unquestioned distinction among the national community of biologists. His stature was recognized by appointment to the Section for Biology and Agriculture of the National Research Council on which he served from 1926 to 1941; during the years 1936 to 1940 he was chairman of the section. He was elected president of four national societies: The Ecological Society of America, 1937; the Limnological Society of America, 1937; the American Society of Zoologists, 1941; and the American Biological Society, 1939 (later named the American Institute for Biological Sciences).

In 1947, at the age of seventy-one, Robert Coker retired as Chairman of the Department of Zoology at the University of North Carolina. At this

age and with illustrious achievements behind him, he began a third career that may, in the long view, prove to include his most enduring achievement.

In the year of his retirement, his book *The Great and Wide Sea* was published. The book appeared for popular consumption in paperback form in 1962. It was translated into German under the title *Das Meere—Der Groste Lebensraum* in 1967. A Spanish translation is currently in progress.

In 1954 a companion volume on fresh-water biology, *Streams, Lakes and Ponds*, was published. It was reprinted in paperback and appeared in that form in 1968.

He also founded the Institute of Fisheries Research in 1947, which is located on Bogue Sound in Morehead City, N.C. and served as its first Director.

Robert Coker again retired in 1953. However, within less than a year and at the age of seventy-eight he accepted an appointment at the University of Puerto Rico as Visiting Professor of Marine Science, a position he held from 1954 to 1962. As consultant for that university, he played a dynamic role in the founding of a new laboratory, the Institute of Marine Biology, at Mayaguez. He also was a leading spirit in organizing the international Association of Island Marine Laboratories of the Caribbean, an association of ten independent marine stations under the flags of five nations located on the islands of Bermuda, Curacao, Santa Domingo, Caracas, Bimini, Punta de Piedras, Barbados, Cumana, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica.

The academic honors that came in his emeritus years include an honorary Doctor of Science awarded by the University of South Carolina in 1948 and a Doctor of Laws awarded by the University of North Carolina in 1959. His Alma Mater has also appropriately named the new research building at the Institute of Marine Science (formerly Institute of Fisheries Research) the Robert E. Coker Hall in his honor.

He was a kindly man of quiet good humor, a man of determination and vision, possessed by a clear sense of humanitarian responsibility. He is remembered for the joy he took in the success of others, for his tireless dedication to scholarship, and for the indelible mark of his creative efforts on men and institutions. He inspired lasting respect and affection.

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