

Obituary



James S. Fralish
1938–2011

James S. Fralish, retired from the Department of Forestry at Southern Illinois University in 1996, but still working, passed away on 30 August 2011 from brain cancer at the age of 72. Born in Bern, Wisconsin in 1938, Jim received his Ph.D. in 1969 from the University of Wisconsin with Orrie Loucks, where he studied the ecology of aspen forest. Previously he had earned both his B.S. and M.S. degrees from Michigan State University, in Forestry and Land Economics, respectively.

After moving to southern Illinois, Jim focused on the community classification and dynamics of deciduous forests, elucidating the soil and site characteristics driving change. His work revealed vegetation shifts that had occurred in the Shawnee Hills over the past 200 years, and predicted the succession of oak–hickory to mesophytic species. Later he became intrigued by pockets of savannas, barrens and rock outcrop communities—an interest that led to a book he coedited with his long-time friends. He was a primary organizer of the First Central Hardwoods Conference at SIU-Carbondale in 1979. The conference has been held at various locations every other year since that first meeting. In 2010, at the 17th Central Hardwood Conference at the University of Kentucky-Lexington, the steering committee presented him with an award for his efforts in establishing the conference and his long-time commitment to its success.

Jim served in numerous other leadership roles, including two terms as Associate Editor of Vegetation Science for *The American Midland Naturalist* (1989–1992; 2004–2006) and a stint as the Book Review Editor for the *Journal of Forestry* (1986–1990). He also contributed greatly to the Association of Southeastern Biologists (President in 1996–1997), and regularly traveled with students and colleagues to its annual meetings, always stopping for a field trip on the way. In 2006, as a member of the Southeastern Chapter of the Ecological Society of America, Jim initiated the Elsie Quarterman–Katherine Keever Award for the best poster presentation.

After retirement, Jim maintained an active research program and continued to serve on graduate student committees and as the major professor for M.S. and Ph.D. students. His last student finished a few weeks before he died. Shortly before he passed away, Jim checked with colleagues on the status of joint research projects and the availability of data from the Plant Ecology Laboratory (PEL) at Wisconsin. He leaves behind data from a large number of permanent plots in southern Illinois and western Kentucky.

While conducting field work for his dissertation in northern Wisconsin, Jim stayed at Kemp Station, a facility owned by the University of Wisconsin. Until this year, he had worked at the Station with his students every summer since 1970. Tom Steele, superintendent at the station, commented that Jim relished the opportunity to introduce students to forest ecosystems, and he did so in an impassioned manner. Jim and his wife Kathy donated generously to the construction of the Dorothy and Stanton Mead Residence Hall at Kemp Station, and the Fralish Family Research Library and Lounge is named in their honor. Part of Jim’s legacy is the large number of scientists, students, and natural resource professionals who have benefited from their generosity.

Following the tradition of Wisconsin ecologists, such as John T. Curtis, Grant Cottam, and Orrie Loucks, Jim was active in the preservation of natural areas and served on the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission. He was a founding member of the local Chapter of the Audubon Society and was involved in the effort to prevent Lusk Creek Canyon from becoming a reservoir. The canyon contains one of the finest free-flowing streams in Illinois, and is a hotspot in southern Illinois for plant diversity. Jim was an activist ecologist in his community, attending open meetings and accepting positions on panel debates regarding the management of natural areas. He challenged with vigor the Forest Service’s practice of cutting through creeks, and the local Sierra Club chapter’s “anti-anything” campaign that included banning prescribed burns as a restoration tool. He carefully explained with data that doing nothing was actually doing something. He wrote opinion articles for the newspaper and lectured on current topics in his classes. His applied training and focus, and his enthusiasm, resulted in an eloquent expert on sustainable forest management.

Jim’s activism did not end with science and conservation. He served on the School Board and founded the youth soccer program in Carbondale. Jim was awarded the prestigious Lindell W. Sturgis Memorial Public Service Award from Southern Illinois University in 1996 and the Carbondale High School Foundation Hall of Service Award in 2010. He also served as the Commissioner of the Carbondale Park District from 2006-2010.

Jim was something of a father figure to his students and younger colleagues, encouraging yet challenging, and patient in his explanations. He edited with a red pen, and thus many joked of their work

bleeding from his criticism. He supervised 36 graduate students and countless undergraduates during his career, providing hours of his time and energy as he transformed nature enthusiasts into scholars.

Jim never stopped working with students in the field. He took pleasure in developing research projects with students and seeing them through to completion. We believe part of this attitude and effort came from the way he interpreted data. He scrutinized outliers, trying to determine a reason for their difference, and he believed that an interpretation of the data required a thorough understanding of the sampling methods and sample sites—all often ignored by the statistics but imbedded in the “noise.”

Jim is survived by his wife of 47 years, Kathy; two children, Christopher Julian-Fralish (and wife Stacey) and Nathaliewyn “Tally” Fralish Robbins; and four grandchildren. His many students and colleagues will miss a wonderful mentor, supportive friend, and provocative scientist.

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