

JOHN N. WOLFE, 1910-1974

John Nicholas Wolfe, ecologist, research administrator, and former Professor of Botany at Ohio State University and Chief of the Environmental Science Branch, Division of Biology and Medicine, AEC, died of cancer at Kettering, Ohio, December 16, 1974, two weeks after his 64th birthday. A memorial service was held at St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Columbus, Ohio, January 4, 1975.

Dr. Wolfe was born in Logan, Hocking County, Ohio, the son of a railway mail clerk. Schooled in the catechism of the Lutheran Church, he enjoyed startling his colleagues in later life with spontaneous and accurate quotations of Scripture appropriate to the situation at hand. John's family moved to Columbus, Ohio, where, after graduating from West High School, he enrolled at Ohio State University and attracted the attention of his botany professors, including E. N. Transeau and L. . Tiffany. After graduating, John continued his formal education at Ohio State.

Although John developed an interest in ecology during graduate school, his M.S. thesis was published as "A Catalogue of the

Lichen of Ohio", in *Ohio Biological Survey Bulletin No. 36*; and his doctoral thesis appeared as "Species Isolation and a Pro-Glacial Lake in Southern Ohio", in the *Ohio Journal of Science* (1942).

Dr. Transeau, then Chairman of Botany at O.S.U., hired John as an Instructor in 1937 to assist him with the ecology classes. When Dr. Transeau retired in 1945, John assumed responsibility for the ecology program at O.S.U. and, for the next 10 years, taught and enthusiastically pursued his research interests in vegetation history and bioclimatology. Portions of this research, begun earlier with Dr. R. T. Wareham and H. T. Scofield, were published in 1949 as the highly regarded *Ohio Biological Survey Bulletin No. 41*, "Microclimate and Macroclimate of Neotoma, a Small Valley in Ohio."

Dr. Wolfe was especially revered by his students. His lectures mixed carefully documented subject matter with showmanship such that his classes were a delightful learning experience for the students who flocked to hear this articulate and challenging man. Some 14 students received Master's

degrees and another 10 earned Ph.D. degrees under John's direction.

In 1955, Dr. Paul Pearson, then Chief of the Biology Branch, Atomic Energy Commission, invited Dr. Wolfe to spend a year or two at the Commission's Washington headquarters. It is not clear why John accepted the appointment or why the AEC sought an ecologist at that particular time, but Dr. Wolfe's arrival in Washington was the beginning of a new experience for him, for the AEC, and for the writer. Perhaps an excerpt from a letter sent to Dr. B. S. Meyer, then Chairman of Botany at O.S.U., provides a clue to his reaction:

" . . . I'm just a hilligan from Hocking County and my roots and my heart lie there. I pinch myself when I sit in on conferences no hill trudger ever had a right to dream about—and suddenly I realize that I'm here and have a job to do. It is my fondest wish that I can keep faith with you and Transeau, Tiffany, Sampson, and Schaffner, now gone. . ."

When John had generally grasped the operations of his organization, he began to familiarize himself with ecology-related activities in other Federal agencies. It was a delightful experience to be joined on the Washington scene by an ally uncowed by bureaucracy to the point of irreverence, whose determination was exceeded only by his wisdom and foresight, who did his homework thoroughly, and who recognized and rejected sham in an instant. My association with John developed into a firm and understanding friendship as well as a most cooperative professional relationship. By the time he returned to O.S.U. in 1957, he had made such an impression on the AEC that his superiors implored him to remain with the Commission.

Back at Columbus, John was in a genuine quandary, torn between his love for teaching and research and his loyalty to Ohio State, on the one hand, and recognition, on the other, that advances in nuclear technology had provided a means by which, if misused, man could effectively destroy his environment. He was aware that forsaking active research and teaching for administrative duties would almost certainly result in loss of professional stature in the eyes of former colleagues. Thus, John had to choose between a comfortable and, perhaps, more "respectable" career at Ohio State and the challenges and possible frustrations that the AEC appointment presented.

His conscience prevailed and he returned to the AEC as Chief of the Environmental

Sciences Branch in 1958. Then, his accelerated crusade for "ecology" begun in earnest within the Division of Biology and Medicine, was extended to higher administrative levels of the AEC and, eventually, to Congress as a spokesman for the AEC. The establishment and funding of a new program in competition with other powerful and entrenched interests in a Federal agency constitute a difficult business at best. However, John's dogged persistence and elegant persuasiveness, in concert with the support of his immediate superiors, won the day. The Environmental Sciences Branch grew in funding and in the scope of the imaginative research programs it supported. Major attention was directed to the inter-relationships of all components of an ecosystem rather than to the functioning of individual parts.

John changed the thrust of the Eniwetok Laboratory's biological investigations from monitoring activities to a systematic evaluation of the cycling of radionuclides in the local ecosystem. Similarly, he promoted support of a full-scale study of the cycling of nutrients in both the terrestrial and aquatic environments of the Fern Lake Watershed near Seattle, using radionuclides as tracers. By this time, the AEC was planning to use a nuclear explosion to create a harbor near Cape Thompson, Alaska. Dr. Wolfe fought hard to convince the AEC of the necessity for a pre-blast survey of biological and environmental systems to provide a basis for post-detonation evaluation. Eventually, he was appointed chairman of a committee to develop such an analysis—possibly the first serious attempt to fully document and evaluate the impact of an atomic detonation. The resulting 1250-page report, "Environment of the Cape Thompson Region, Alaska", was perhaps an important factor in the indefinite postponement of this Chariot project.

In 1960, John pressed for the development of a broadscale investigation of Hanford-produced radionuclides in the Columbia River estuary and the ocean and supported Lauren Donaldson's long-term study of the effects of ionizing radiation on salmon. Among the other imaginative research programs he encouraged were Tom Odum's expanded Chariot-type program in the tropical rain forest, Stan Auerbach's and George Woodwell's programs at Oak Ridge and Brookhaven, respectively, and Frank Lowman's investigations in Puerto Rico. There were, of course, a good many other programs, large and small, in which John took a special interest. All in all, he and his col-

leagues developed an AEC-sponsored ecology program that was most productive, impressive, and envied.

In September, 1970, Dr. Wolfe began a year of administrative leave at the University of Washington to lecture and prepare a textbook on radioecology. However, he developed vascular problems and, although given the best medical attention available, he was unable to achieve his planned academic and writing goals. Following his return to AEC, a heart attack hospitalized him in Columbus. Dr. Wolfe's health continued to decline and he retired from the AEC, December 23, 1972.

A one-time Associate Editor (Botany) of *Ecological Monographs* and a strong supporter of the Society, John became increasingly concerned by the lack of a body of ecological information suitable for application to man's problems and by the early failure of

the ESA to participate in controversial public affairs. He firmly believed ecologists in academia should be willing to apply their knowledge to the solution of practical environmental problems facing humanity. Indeed, John's invited address at the AIBS meetings in Columbus, September 4, 1968, focused on these issues. The address, entitled "Chickens", received a standing ovation—the only time in the history of AIBS meetings that such an honor has been accorded a speaker.

In Dr. Wolfe's death, many of us have lost a magnificent friend, but the ecological profession has lost an extraordinary and far-sighted leader. John's family can take comfort in the realization that his most significant contributions to the advancement of the profession must surely be better understood by future generations of ecologists.

George Sprugel, Jr.