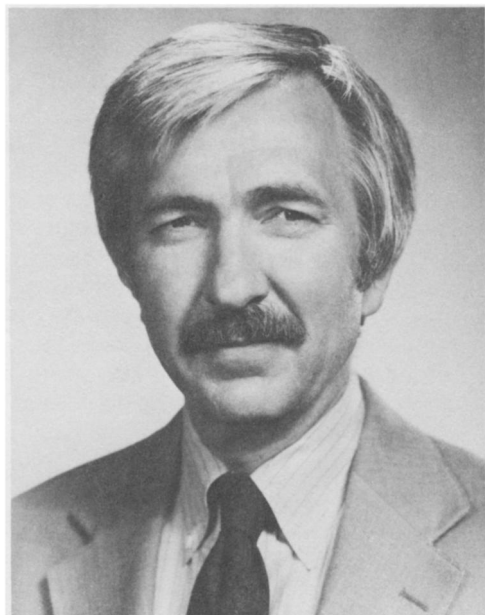


richard b. root, president

1985–1986



Biographies of leading ecologists are meant to inform the immediate reader as well as provide the detail necessary to historians. Our next President, Richard B. Root, richly deserves such attention, and hence our pooled efforts to recreate the earlier and middle phases of his ecological career. Dick was born in Michigan, and in prowling the woodlands there he acquired and developed his skills as a consummate naturalist. He was accorded graduate student status while a sophomore at the University of Michigan and was treated with great respect (and often some indulgence) by his primary mentors, Francis Evans, Nelson Hairston, and, especially, Frederick Smith. Dick organized discussion groups and acquired such skills as fern identification and owl hooting. His first paper, published in *Ecology* (1960), was on life tables for potentially immortal flatworms, and fulfilled a requirement for his honors degree in zoology.

His doctoral research was done at Berkeley under the supervision of Frank Pitelka. Dick chose his topic wisely, and the resultant

work on gnatcatchers is an acknowledged classic, both for its style and for development of the widely cited “guild” concept. It was during this interval, perhaps, that he acquired the traits which are his hallmark today: a scholarly and totally impressive command of the ecological literature, a long-standing commitment to adequate field data, and a view that to understand how communities are organized, one must be able to describe the underlying interactions in their native setting. Dick moved from Berkeley to Cornell—where today he is Professor of Ecology and Entomology—with the desire to switch research from birds to insects because the latter “lend themselves to experimental manipulation.” His vision of combining applied and basic approaches to plant-insect systems led him to work on domesticated and wild crucifers and their associated insects. This research yielded the important concept of component communities, founded an industry dedicated to testing the resource concentration hypothesis, and produced an immortal rock ballad, “In Dr. Root’s Garden,” by Chrysalis. After more than a decade of working with crucifer insects, Dick made another carefully thought out switch in research programs, this time to the native goldenrod communities of the northeastern United States, with an increasing emphasis on interaction among plants. In these goldenrod studies, Dick is merging the experimental approach he perfected during his collard era with geographical comparisons and even quantitative genetics. It is ecosystem research, but an unusual brand, because of its grounding in biology and natural history, rather than in flow charts and fluxes.

Dick has found time to teach and inspire perhaps 20 Ph.D. students of his own. He approaches his graduate students as something of an extended family. In this crazed atmosphere he has nurtured a diversity of students that few departments can rival—ornithologists, entomologists, botanists, mammalogists, and mathematical modellers. Idio-

syncrasies and outrageousness thrive (as is evident in the longstanding tenure of Dick's experimentalist, John Gowan), but in a positive and creative way. There are some common themes that Dick impresses on his menagerie: a respect for good natural history, a wariness about ecological fads, a sense of humor and questioning about the "meaning and merits" of scientific research, and an enthusiasm for "getting into the field." And for all the freedom that Dick encourages, he is also capable of stern judgements, such as, "You will never again give a talk that is that poor!" (and you don't). Out of the cauldron that is Root's lab, students emerge with an intense loyalty to Dick and to one another, a bond that can often be seen (and heard)

around an evening dinner table at the ESA meetings.

Dick has served our society in many ways: on the editorial board, as Vice-President, and now President. Although Dick always frets about his unimpressive publication rate, he should not: when measured on the scales of actual influence and scientific contribution, his productivity is enormous. Our society would do well to live up to his standards, and we are lucky that Dick has the personality to prod us to do so (though it might be a noisy push, rather than a gentle prod).

—Peter M. Kareiva

—Robert T. Paine

Source: Bulletin of the Ecological Society of America, Vol. 66, No. 3, Directory Issue (Sep., 1985), pp. 328-329.
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