



James Thomas (Tom) Callahan

**29 December 1945—
10 September 1999**

Tom Callahan, a staunch advocate for ecology, lost a courageous battle with cancer this past September. He worked right up to his death, actively engaged in improving the discipline of ecology. Although Tom was a familiar figure to many ESA members, many others both within and outside ESA unwittingly owe him a debt of gratitude for his selfless promotion of ecology within the National Science Foundation (NSF). All of the programs that Tom was associated with, or took an interest in, benefited from his involvement, and the multiplier effect of his years of promotion and facilitation would be impossible to calculate. For those who knew him, he will remain an unforgettable character.

Tom's accent and often-colorful idioms revealed his Southern heritage. You couldn't sit through an NSF panel meeting with Tom present without having your vocabulary expanded, if not exactly enriched. He was born in rural Virginia, but spent most of his formative years in Aiken, South Carolina. His undergraduate years were spent at the University of South Carolina, and included a summer (1968) at the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory in an undergraduate research program. For graduate study, he went to the University of Georgia in 1969, where he began a Master's program under the supervision of Dave Coleman. This soon evolved into a Ph.D. study of the population dynamics of the fall webworm *Hyphantria cunea* Drury. Following Dave Coleman's move to Colorado State University, Tom came under the tutelage of Dac Crossley, forming what many would describe as an unholy alliance, as well as a deep and lasting friendship. As evidence of the latter, Tom made a brave trip, while dealing with the rigors of chemotherapy, to attend Dac's retirement celebration in Athens, Georgia.

While in graduate school, Tom developed a reputation for enjoying heated discussions, asking provocative questions, and helping other students—basic personality traits that he carried with him throughout life. He also was unafraid to work for causes that meant a lot to him, an early example being his on-campus efforts to promote and organize the first Earth Day in 1970. It is hard to imagine now that there were sharp divisions over the first Earth Days on some campuses. This willingness to work

hard for a principle or concept is another of Tom's attributes that would resurface in many forms. Tom moved through graduate school quickly, finished his Ph.D. degree in 1972, and accepted a position at NSF. Those who were at UGa with Tom will carry fond memories of intense dialogues and free-wheeling debates catalyzed by cold beer and boiled goobers, and seemingly off-the-wall comments to faculty and graduate student peers that often turned out to be real insights.

Shortly after starting at NSF, Tom had the misfortune to be assigned the task of carrying bad news to a coordinating committee meeting of the International Biological Program. His charge was to inform some projects that their budgets would be reduced significantly during the next round of funding. It is clear to many that Tom was unprepared for the intensity of the reaction to this unexpected news. And it has become part of our folklore that Tom's honorable response to this rather rough treatment was a personal resolution to protect and enhance NSF funding for ecological research.

Nowhere is that resolution more obvious than in the establishment and growth of the Long Term Ecological Research Program (LTER). Working with then Division Director John Brooks in the late 1970s, Tom helped organize a series of planning workshops for what became the LTER program. Many others, in and outside of NSF, helped contribute to LTER's evolution (Betsy Clark, Frank Golley, Frank Harris, Paul Risser, Dan Botkin, Wayne Swank, Jerry Franklin, Ori Loucks, and George Lauff, to name a few of the very early players), but

Tom was a singular and constant force for more than 20 years. He worked to synthesize concepts and objectives for LTER during its developmental phase and was a principal architect of the early LTER program announcement/request for proposals. Anticipating the potential contentiousness of LTER's "Five Core Areas," Tom purposely crafted language for the program announcement that was sufficiently vague to permit sites a great deal of flexibility and creativity in how they would cover those areas. Published early in LTER's history, Tom's 1984 *BioScience* article remains an excellent summary of the basic intent and goals of the program.

Tom played multiple roles as LTER developed, and while most of these were ordinary tasks of an NSF officer, they were always done with a personal sense of engagement that made Tom's interest in the science of ecology quite clear. He provided continuity through many rotating program officers; organized site reviews; orchestrated panel meetings; advised sites during proposal preparation; explained reviewers' comments; engaged in workshops; helped to develop rules for supplemental proposals that often guided LTER toward new directions (particularly in later years); and linked LTER with other programs at NSF in a mutually beneficial way. All of this promoted LTER and ecology, and was done in the open, straightforward, honest, but often blunt manner that was uniquely Tom's.

Because of the length of time that Tom was at NSF, there are many who have interacted with him on proposals. With Tom, the proposal process was a level playing field; those who asked advice or criticism could be assured that all were treated alike. Often, the listener would not hear what he/she wanted to be told. Tom often prefaced his comments with a disclaimer that, while what he had to say might not be pleasant, the intent was to be helpful. And it was. When faced with explaining reality to folks at panel meetings or site reviews, it was not unusual for Tom to wear an expression that was simultaneously world-weary and kind. He did not enjoy being the bearer of unpleasant news, but operated on the premise that candor was the kindest way.

If you were around Tom for any length of time you were exposed to a wry and quirky wit. As quick to poke fun at himself as at others, his humor was free ranging, and might have multiple targets and references, layers of puns and entendres. These jokes could be lengthy and offered with a slightly demonic smile, or erupt as quick retorts accompanied by a punctuating laugh. Tom didn't giggle, and his manner was hardly cute; he was good company.

He was also a devoted father and husband. Tom hated to schedule business travel on weekends because he felt strongly that he should be with his family. It often was hard to get him to commit to evening work sessions for the same reason. He was matter-of-fact that home was important, and it clearly was. He leaves a wife he loved deeply. Anne would probably be embarrassed by Tom's stated devotion, as would his three now-adult children, Martha, Jim, and Will Callahan. When he talked about them, it was evident there was no more adoring husband, no prouder father.

In recent years, it became clear to many of us that Tom had developed a second professional love—that the various programs at NSF had a significant competitor in Blandy Experimental Farm and State Arboretum, a 700-acre biological field station of the University of Virginia. He became an excellent representative for Blandy Farm and a shameless promoter. It was fun to listen to Tom because his love for the field station was so transparent.

Tom first visited Blandy Farm in the fall of 1995 and instantly fell in love with it. As Program Director for NSF's Field Station and Marine Lab competition, Tom had become a fierce supporter of field stations and marine labs, but had maintained a distance. One had the feeling that Tom had a lot of pent-up energy, that he longed to step out of the office, get his hands dirty, and help build a research program. And that is what he did at Blandy.

First, he initiated studies on tent caterpillars and fall webworms, subjects he knew well from his dissertation 25 years earlier. He would drive out from his home in Fairfax, 60 or so miles away, spend a day or two each week collecting and mapping, and then go

back and catch up with his NSF duties. He seemed to relish the idea of being a PI (a reversal of his typical role), and especially that of a mentor to students. In 1997, he single-handedly began a "herpetological survey" of the Farm's ponds, fields, and forests. In addition to drift fences and pitfall traps, Tom made turtle traps out of chicken wire and started mark-recapture studies of snapping and Eastern painted turtles. A Ph.D. student would later take over the turtle project, but Tom was very involved right up to his death.

Tom, true to his nature, always had the big picture in mind. At Blandy, he would toggle between fieldwork and helping with programmatic issues. Tom was never shy about offering advice on issues as diverse as budgets, to personnel, to planning. He became interested in public programming, and the year before his death was appointed to the Board of Directors of the Foundation of the State Arboretum, a foundation that supports Blandy's efforts in environmental education. He would have made an excellent director of a field station.

Tom was good for Blandy, and Blandy was good for Tom. He had his own room where he slept and held court. He worked with the students and established meaningful personal relationships with all employees, from faculty to maintenance staff, reflecting both his professional training and his blue-collar roots. He especially loved the students, loved being in the field with them, loved being part of the gang.

On 2 September, about a week before he died, Tom drove himself to Blandy with some difficulty, took some staff out for breakfast, did some fieldwork, rested a few hours, and then drove home—not to return. Blandy will miss him!

We all will miss his positive presence and his humor. Yes, . . . we will miss him.

Art McKee
Oregon State University

William Michener
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Michael Bowers
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