

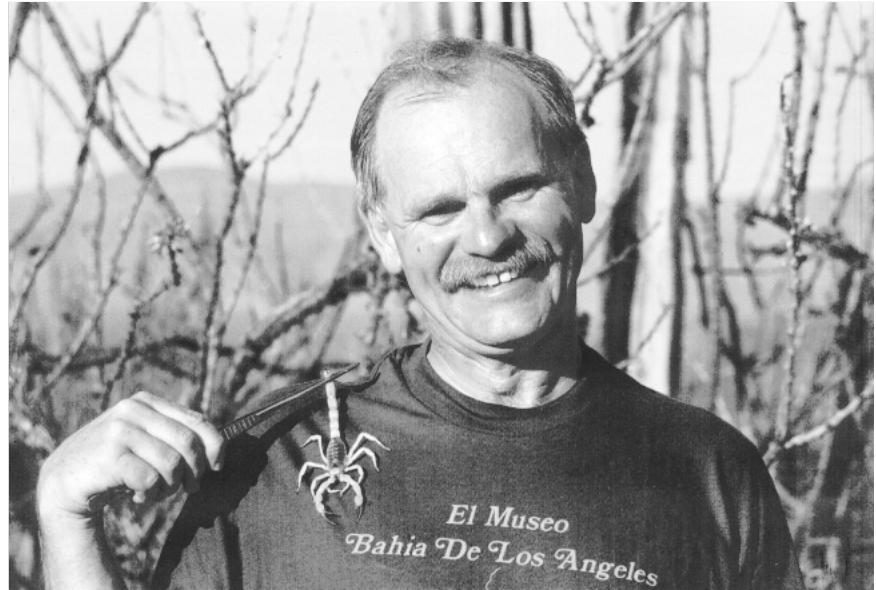
Resolution of Respect

Gary Allen Polis

28 August 1946–
29 March 2000

In a storm in the Sea of Cortez, off Baja California, Mexico, Gary Allen Polis died. In the same accident, after the capsizing of their research boat, four other people also perished: Michael D. Rose, postgraduate researcher at UC Davis, and Takuya Abe, Masahiko Higashi, and Shigero Nakano, of Kyoto University, Japan. Four other UC Davis scientists and students were able to swim to a nearby island and survived the incident: graduate students Ralph Haygood and Becca Lewison, postgraduate researcher Gary Huxel, and undergraduate student Sarah Ratay.

Gary was born and raised in Southern California. After graduation from Loyola University of Los Angeles in 1969, majoring in biology and psychology, he taught at El Camino High School in Los Angeles; he was chosen as teacher of the year there in 1972. This dedication to students and love of teaching continued throughout his academic career. He earned M.A. and then Ph.D degrees at the University of California at Riverside, in 1975 and 1977, respectively. Gary served as Assistant Professor at Oregon State University from 1977 to 1979, then moved to Vanderbilt University, where he was promoted to Professor in 1998. From July 1998 until his death, he was Professor and Chair of the Department of Environmental Science and Policy at the University of California, Davis. Gary was also a member of the Ecology and the Population Biology Graduate Groups at UC Davis. He had an immediate and profound influence upon the community in Davis, where he showed great skills



at advancing the causes of ecology and environmental education.

His ability to work with people and ideas led Gary to be named an Aldo Leopold Leadership Fellow, to the presidency of the American Society of Naturalists, and to a leadership role at the American Institute of Biological Science Presidents Summit meetings during 2000, the year of his death. Gary was a gifted ambassador of science, who loved to share the excitement of habitats and organisms with the public. On his curriculum vitae, one finds a long list of "contributions to the communication of science." He appeared in *National Geographic Explorer* films and in PBS documentaries, and he gave many interviews about his work to a host of newspapers and magazines. Gary's long association with the Earthwatch Institute brought scores of volunteers to his research site in the Sea of Cortez, and contributed an extraordinary amount of knowledge of, and respect for, ecology to lay people. It is telling that, at other Earthwatch sites, teenagers were not always viewed as useful contributors; in

contrast, Gary found a way to really engage younger participants.

Biological diversity and graduate work with scorpions were the early foci of Gary's professional career. At Vanderbilt University, he taught invertebrate zoology and oceanography, and these interests led to the publication of the scholarly book, *The Biology of Scorpions* (Stanford University Press), in 1990, and the children's book, *Scorpion Man: Exploring the World of Scorpions* (Scribner's Sons), with L. P. Pringle in 1994. By the mid 1980s, a fascination with the habitats of scorpions blossomed into the study of deserts in general, and led to publication of *The Ecology of Desert Communities* (University of Arizona Press) in 1991. Gary's greatest contributions to science were in trophic ecology, and these came later in his career. The multi-authored volume *Food Webs: Integration of Patterns and Dynamics* (Chapman & Hall), edited by Gary and Kirk Winemiller, was the most influential single volume of the decade on this important topic. The meeting Gary organized that

led to the book was one of the most exciting scientific gatherings we ever attended—and it was Gary's personal touch, in addition to his scientific leadership, that made it so special.

He traveled constantly for collaborations and research projects, and almost always with his wife, Sharon, and his children, Evan and Maya. We venture to speculate that it was a magic combination of fierce curiosity, intellectual independence, and an unusual propensity to collaborate that led Gary to his strikingly original insights about the mechanisms and functioning of food webs. His collaborations during this fertile period with Mary Power, John Moore, and Robert Holt, among others, led to advances in understanding of the reticulation, variability, and omnivory of trophic interactions. Without Gary, the coalescence of these ideas

that occurred during the exciting period of 1995 through 1999 would have taken decades. His final intellectual contribution—the discovery of the generality and importance of ecological subsidy and detrital reworking as a donor-controlled process in food webs—was as original and powerful as his early work with the interconnections in trophic webs.

Gary and his family shared their recreation and home generously with friends and colleagues. Their regular feasts, parties, and rafting trips to the Sierra brought members of the university, the town, and his large extended family together. Gary cooked, served wines, and generally celebrated student accomplishments, visiting scientists, and many other events that were so much the richer for his exuberant hospitality—and fine Italian cooking.

Gary is survived by his wife, Sharon Polis, his son, Evan, and daughter, Maya. In Davis, and we are sure in Nashville and many other places, he will be fondly remembered for the joy and fascination of natural history and ecology that he brought to colleagues, students, and the general public. His door was always open, and anyone with interesting ideas to discuss was always welcome. We are so much the richer for Gary's scientific and human contributions.

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