George Sprugel, Jr.

1919–1999

A truly outstanding natural scientist and administrator, George Sprugel, Jr., passed away on 10 September 1999 at the Indiana University Medical Center in Indianapolis, Indiana.

George was born in Boston, Massachusetts on 26 September 1919, the son of George and Frances Sprugel. The family then moved to Williams, a small farming community in central Iowa, where young George first learned to appreciate nature. After graduating from Williams High School in 1937, he matriculated at Waldorf Junior College in Forest City, Iowa, obtaining the A.A. degree in 1939. He next entered Iowa State University at Ames for a year, when he was called to active duty in the U.S. Navy.

This seemingly mundane event turned out to be a major influence on his future activities, and he maintained a strong loyalty to the U.S. Navy throughout his adult life. Initially, he served aboard the U.S.S. Bowditch, a hydrographic survey ship involved in mapping the ocean approaches to both ends of the Panama Canal. Upon the outbreak of World War II, he was transferred to the Motor Torpedo Boat Training Center in Newport, Rhode Island. There he developed a MTB launching rack for torpedoes, which resulted in his being shipped to the Solomon Islands and the Allied-controlled part of New Guinea. His orders were to supervise the installation and use of these devices on all PT boats newly activated as part of the Southwest Pacific Fleet. He was subsequently assigned to the command of an MTB in Papua and was involved in a number of invasions on Japanese-held areas, until his boat was sunk and his crew was lost to enemy action. He was then transferred to the MTB Training Center in Rhode Island for instructional duty, until he was detached for study at the Naval War College.

Shortly after the end of the war, George returned to Iowa State University, where he obtained Bachelor’s, Master’s, and Doctoral degrees in zoology and entomology between 1946 and 1950. His alma mater appointed him as an Assistant Professor, but gave him leave of absence in 1951, when the Navy recalled him to active duty at the onset of the Korean War. He was appointed as the Acting Head of the Biology Branch of the Office of Naval Research in Washington, D.C., with the rank of Captain, USNR. Upon release from active duty in 1953, he became the Special Assistant to the Assistant Director of the Biological and Medical Sciences Division of the National Science Foundation, which was just getting established. This experience led to his appointment as the first Program Director of Environmental Biology in the NSF, a post in which he was able to provide significant support to ecological research during the 10 years he held this position (1954–1964). Dr. Sprugel was then selected as Chief Scientist of the National Park Service, where he served until October 1966, when he was selected as Chief of the Illinois Natural History Survey in Champaign, Illinois. He held this post until his retirement as Chief Emeritus on 1 September 1980.

Dr. Sprugel was called upon to serve in a number of important advisory capacities, e.g., the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Reclamation, Department of Commerce, American Institute of Biological Sciences (AIBS), National Aeronautical and Space Administration (NASA), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), National Research Council (NRC), and the National Academy of Sciences.

He was also active in a number of scientific societies and served in elective positions in many of them, e.g., American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)—Vice President and Chairman of the Biological Sciences Section (1970); American Society of Zoologists (ASZ)—Secretary (1970–1972); Ecological Society of America (ESA)—Vice President (1968); and The Institute of Ecology—Program Manager (1973).

I first became acquainted with George when I served with him on the Executive Committee of the American Institute of Biological Sciences (AIBS) in Washington during the years 1972–1976. He was elected as president of AIBS in 1974, where his assistance in planning and organizing the annual meetings that I chaired that year at Arizona State University was invaluable. Furthermore, at that time he assumed considerable additional responsibility due to the untimely death of Dr. John Olive, Executive Director of AIBS. Dr. Sprugel took a leave of absence from his regular position in Illinois to return to AIBS Headquarters in Washington, where he worked long hours stabilizing the management of this organization, as well as initiating the search for a new Executive Director. For this purely voluntary activity, he was given the AIBS President’s

Resolution of Respect
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, Orie Loucks, and George Lauff, to name a few of the very early players), but