

John F. Eisenberg

With the death of J. F. Eisenberg (1935–2003), the scientific world has lost a great mammalogist and wildlife biologist, but those of us who knew him personally and have had the privilege of working with him in the field, are deprived of a remarkable human being who bestowed innumerable kindnesses on students, friends and colleagues. John died at his home in Bellingham, Washington State (USA). His untimely death at the age of 68 leaves a gap that would be difficult to fill. In his passing, we have lost one of the intellectual giants who contributed brilliantly to the advancement of mammalogy.

John Frederick Eisenberg was born in Everett, Washington, but his family traces its origins to Germany. Having graduated from Washington State University, he went on to his master's and Ph D degrees in Zoology at the University of Berkeley, California. In 1965 he moved to Washington DC where he was an Assistant Director for Animal Programs at the Smithsonian Institution's National Zoological Park, and an Adjunct Professor of Zoology at the University of Maryland. He left Washington to teach at the University of Florida, where he held the title of Eminent Scholar and was the Katherine Ordway Professor of Ecosystem Conservation for nearly 20 years. He retired in 2000 and returned to Washington State. Eisenberg was the recipient of the 1981 C. Hart Merriam Award – the highest honour bestowed by the American Society of Mammalogists. In addition, he received the Archie F. Carr Medal in recognition of his outstanding contributions to the knowledge and understanding of man's natural heritage. Eisenberg was also a fellow of the Animal Behaviour Society and the New York Zoological Society.

Despite the distinctions he achieved in several different spheres, John remained a very modest man. As well as being a renowned researcher, he was also a prolific writer. A measure of John's contributions can be seen in the vast number of scientific publications he produced including *The Mammalian Radiations: An Analysis of Trends in Evolution, Adaptation, and Behavior* published in 1981 by

The University of Chicago Press. The three volumes on *Mammals of the Neotropics* (two of which were co-authored with Kent. H. Redford) represent major contributions to our understanding of the mammalian fauna of the region. Neotropics refers to the geographic region of subtropical Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean Islands, and the continent of South America. John began his fieldwork in the tropics of the western hemisphere in June 1960 when he and his brother Thomas crossed the Tropic of Cancer to trap small mammals in Mexico. He made several visits to the region to study the mammalian fauna. Of the 449 species of mammals known from the northern neotropics, John had first-hand experience with 116 species.

In 1966–69, his research efforts were diverted to Madagascar and Sri Lanka. The Smithsonian Institution, chartered for the 'increase and diffusion of knowledge among men', has traditionally been deeply involved in the study of mammals. When a request was made jointly by The Wild Life Protection Society of Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was then known) and the Department of Wildlife in 1966 to initiate a detailed study of the elephant in the island, the Smithsonian Institution sent Eisenberg as the Team Leader. The study that lasted from 1967 to 1969, concentrated on three dry zone national parks: Wilpattu, Gal Oya and Ruhuna. John, with the able assistance of Melvyn Lockhart, began an ecological study of the elephant and other large mammals in Wilpattu National Park in the northwest, while John's postgraduate student George McKay initiated a study of the elephant population in Gal Oya National Park in the east, and Fred Kurt concentrated on the elephant population in Ruhuna National Park in the southeast. It was the late Hilary Cruz who gave me the opportunity to work with Eisenberg in Wilpattu. I have very vivid recollections of my first meeting with John at a makeshift camp by the side of the Moderagam aru (river) in the north-western corner of the park. I had a foretaste then of what has remained with me as an abiding memory of John – his warm friendship, rambunctious personality,

cheerfulness and his passionate hatred of hypocrisy and pretension.

Ecological research then was basic but tremendously exciting. I found working with John and Melvyn in Wilpattu a wonderfully rewarding experience. Using only a pair of binoculars and a notebook, Eisenberg and Lockhart carried out a detailed study of the large mammals in Wilpattu, with particular reference to the elephant, which was subsequently published by the Smithsonian Institution Press in 1972 entitled, *An Ecological Reconnaissance of Wilpattu National Park, Ceylon*. It was a remarkable contribution to the understanding of the ecology of Wilpattu's large mammals, for until then wildlife management was merely an art of the possible. Their study led to the acceptance of the need for systematic research as a basis for improved management of wildlife in Sri Lanka. Eisenberg and Lockhart's survey of Wilpattu National Park provides ecological and behavioural data on over a dozen mammal species, and it underlines the fact that large mammals not only merit protection for their own sake, but their presence may be necessary for the proper functioning of the ecosystem, and for the survival of at least some of its plant components. John had the gift of being able to paint the broader picture of mammalian evolution and radiation. His conscientiousness and meticulous attention to detail contributed in no small measure to his incredible achievement in the field of mammalogy. John Eisenberg will be sadly missed but his work will endure. What John gave us perhaps were the most valuable gifts anyone can offer his fellow human beings: his time and inspiration. To the future generations, John has left his scientific legacy, but to those of my generation who knew him and interacted with him, he has bequeathed a pleasant memory of a man whose friendship brightened our lives.

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