

# Robert H. Whittaker

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Robert H. Whittaker was recruited to Cornell in 1968. He had already gained a position of prestige for his landmark studies in plant ecology, and the newly formed Division of Biological Sciences hoped to use his leadership to shape its Section of Ecology and Systematics. His influence pervaded faculty recruitment and the shaping of several academic programs at Cornell. His vigorous research program served as an example for his colleagues and attracted superior students and numerous distinguished visitors to Cornell, helping to build the ecology program into the strongest in the world. This program and the careers of its faculty and students remain a principal legacy of this man.

Bob was born in Wichita, Kansas. Following graduation from Washburn Municipal University in 1942, he joined the Army Air Corps. At the end of World War II he resumed his education at the University of Illinois. His interest in insect communities led him to the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee, but he quickly realized that plants would provide a better test of his theories of community structure. While he retained an active interest in insects throughout his life, his doctoral research converted him to a career in botany. He obtained his Doctor of Philosophy degree in zoology in 1948 and took a position at Washington State College at Pullman. At the nearby Hanford Laboratories in Richland, Washington, he conducted pioneering studies of model ecosystems using radioisotopic tracers. He moved to Brooklyn College in 1954, and in 1966 to the newly created University of California at Irvine.

Bob was actively involved with a number of professional organizations. He served as editor for *Ecology*, *Vegetatio*, and *Paleobiology* as well as consultant for the National Science Foundation. He was elected vice president of the Ecological Society of America (1971) and was president of the American Society of Naturalists at the time of his death. In 1966 he was presented the Mercer Award for the most outstanding publication in ecology of that year; the award was for a paper on the vegetation of the Santa Catalina Mountains in Arizona. He was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1975, to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1979, and was an honorary member of the British Ecological Society and of the Swedish Phytogeographical Society.

Bob Whittaker was recognized as an intellectual leader in ecology on an international scale and as the world's foremost authority on plant communities. His numerous studies on vegetation of the United States and several other countries led to major technical and conceptual advances in his field, and were the starting points for uncountable works by other scientists. But in addition to his contributions to basic science, he was also capable

of broad synthesis. He produced benchmark publications in diverse areas of biology, ranging from community ordination to niche theory to chemical ecology to phylogeny. His talents in research transferred admirably to his teaching. He was widely noted for his profound erudition and scholarship, and for the new insights he could provide. He was a master of the English language, serving up his ideas on a fully adorned platter of well-crafted sentences and memorable metaphors.

Although he earned distinction as a scientist, Bob will be most remembered by his friends and colleagues for his strength of character. He took special interest in young scientists. No one on the faculty of Ecology and Systematics took more of a personal interest in the welfare of the graduate students, and his devotion to them began before their arrival at Cornell. Despite his busy life, he always had time to discuss a problem, scientific or personal, and obviously relished his interactions with younger colleagues and students. He was particularly attentive to the plight of oppressed and underprivileged scientists in other countries, answering inquiries from individuals from underdeveloped countries and from behind the Iron Curtain with extreme courtesy and almost paternal interest. He gave freely of his energies as a protector and teacher, and had friends throughout the world because of it. The scientific community will surely miss Bob Whittaker's intellect; but a loss of no less magnitude was his warmth and humanity, which was not well disguised beneath his formal exterior.

*Simon A. Levin, Gene E. Likens, Brian F. Chabot*