

DEREK DAVIS – NOVA SCOTIA NATURALIST EXTRAORDINAIRE

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Derek Sidney Davis

Dr. Derek Sidney Davis passed away on August 7th, 2017. Derek was a distinguished Nova Scotia naturalist and was the Chief Curator of Science at the Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History for 25 years. He was a long-time NSIS member, on the Council from 1972-1982 and the NSIS President (1981-1982). This short article celebrates his life and his substantial contributions to our understanding of the natural history of Nova Scotia.

Derek was born in 1938 in East Ham, London, England. As a child he was evacuated with his family from the bricks and pavement of the war-time city to a village near the River Thames. Exploring the county-side, looking in ponds and ditches he became interested in the wild life he saw: birds, insects, small mammals and especially snails. After the war, Derek discovered the British Museum of Natural History which had no entrance fee. He began to go there every week, fascinated by the specimens in its vast collections and learning about the biology of the animals they represented. He joined the museum's Junior Naturalists Club and later the Field Observers Club. He was supported and greatly influenced by the museum educator Jaqueline Palmer. She encouraged Derek to begin his first field observations by

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tracking the movement of the snails in his family garden. The Field Observers Club held summer camps on Alderney in the Channel Islands with the support of Miss Palmer and here Derek learned to run transects, observe and sketch specimens and keep card catalogues. Jaqueline Palmer's mentorship played a key role in developing Derek's interest in natural history and shaping his passion for the environment and environmental education.

He studied Biology and Geology at Chelsea College, University of London. In 1965 he immigrated to Canada and began a PhD program at Dalhousie. Within a week of arriving in Canada, he went to the old NS Museum on Spring Garden Road and three years later he became the first Chief Curator of Science at the new museum on Summer Street.

Derek believed strongly in the vital role museums play in educating and encouraging people to experience, learn about, and value their local environments. To assist with environmental education within schools he designed and wrote the Field Studies Series for Grade 10 Biology which created field guides so high school teachers could provide hands-on experiences for their students in their local communities on the Atlantic, Northumberland Strait, Fundy and Northeastern Cape Breton Shores.

Derek participated as a scientific advisor to the N.S. Government's Committee on Land-use Policy and as a member of the Special Places, Parks, Off-shore and Significant Wild Habitats Issue Groups, Wildlife Habitats Advisory Issue Group and the Coastal Zone Mapping Sub-Committee.

In the late 1970s, following the lead of Parks Canada, those concerned with parks planning in the Province decided to include environmental protection as well as outdoor recreation needs in the selection of new parks and in planning for activities within all parks. Needing an environmental rationale to support logical decision making, Parks Canada adopted a landscape classification system based on geological, climatic and botanical factors. The Federal government had already created a national classification to be used for selection of new national parks. The Nova Scotia Parks Department (part of the then Department of Lands and Forests) desired to create such a bio-geographic land classification system for the Province. The expertise and data for this inter-disciplinary effort was dispersed among several government agencies. The Nova Scotia Museum was asked to

lead the inter-departmental group created to lead the initiative, and Derek was assigned to this role by the Museum.

This effort was financed by the Province through a budget administered by the then Maritime Resource Management Service (MRMS) and allocated by the Nova Scotia Deputy Ministers' Committee on Use Policy Committee for this purpose. A group of technical experts, chaired by Derek from the Museum, and including Lands and Forests, and MRMS, hired Griffiths-Muecke Consultants to assemble and integrate the necessary data sets. Data, and assistance in interpreting it, was obtained from personnel from many other government agencies responsible for geological, soils, meteorological, hydrological, vegetation, wildlife, and entomological data.

Rather than terming it a bio-geographical analysis as such work has been termed elsewhere in Canada the expression "theme regions" was preferred. "Theme regions" recognises the origins of the work as a rationale for parks planning in which inter-dependent environmental themes are identified. Derek also particularly liked this descriptive term and its appeal to environmental education.

The effort took several years during which Derek's enthusiasm for the work of integrating these many data sets continued to grow. Like many complex projects the need for money also continued to grow and Derek was always there to make whatever contributions he could, and especially to assemble money from other agencies. When the work was eventually completed it was published by the Museum and has formed the basis for environmental decision making in Nova Scotia ever since.

Derek conducted biological research on the distribution and ecology of benthos and land and freshwater molluscs. He also lectured in Ecology in the Department of Environmental Planning at the N.S. College of Art and Design, and was a frequent lecturer and field trip leader for local universities, teacher in-services and the general public. It was here that he conveyed the importance of a holistic view of the landscape. Derek wrote over 60 publications.

Derek's enthusiasm, great knowledge and commitment to Nova Scotia and Canada's natural history were noted by all who met him. He will be greatly missed by all who knew or worked with him, and long remembered as a mentor, and for his many significant contributions to our understanding and appreciation of the natural history of our Province.

