

PROFILE

Henry S. Fitch: A Legendary Passion for Natural History

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I had not spoken with Henry Fitch in quite some time, and not since his wife, Virginia, had passed away in December 2002 — but Bob Powell had requested that we do something for *Iguana*, and I wanted to say “hello” and to see if he was interested in collaborating on something for that publication.

I called in the morning. Henry answered the phone right away and actually sounded pleased to hear from me. We reminisced briefly, and the subsequent conversation went something like this:

RWH: You’re 92 now, right?

HSF (chuckling): No, 93.

RWH: So, how’re you feeling?

HSF: I’m pretty crippled-up and don’t get around much.

RWH: Sorry to hear that. I guess you’re not getting into the field then?

HSF: Well, I’m just starting a radio telemetry project with Timber Rattlesnakes. We put the transmitters in the snakes this morning.

RWH: (Silent incredulity).

And that pretty much tells you what Henry Fitch is all about.

When I first arrived at the University of Kansas as an incredibly naive undergraduate in 1967, I didn’t know Henry Fitch existed, much less that he was doing exactly the kind of research I dreamed of doing myself. The attraction for me at Kansas was Bill Duellman and his amazingly active program of herpetology in the American tropics. But now I had access to a remarkable library (Duellman’s), and I somehow found some of



Henry Fitch with a *Boa constrictor* in Chiapas, Mexico (February, 1972). Photograph by R.W. Henderson.

Fitch's publications. It was a real epiphany to realize that someone was doing (and had been doing for many years) exactly what I wanted to do. I devoured his classic *Autecology of the Copperhead* (not knowing what "autecology" meant when I started to read it) and anything else snake-related.

Dr. Fitch had been on sabbatical with his family in Costa Rica, and he returned to Kansas in the fall of 1968. I enrolled in his vertebrate natural history course and, although I don't recall the details, I'm sure I forced myself upon him very early on. I became a frequent visitor to the natural history reservation that now bears his name, often arriving unannounced on a weekend afternoon when he was trying to relax and spend time with his family. Often he allowed me to make runs, either with him or on my own, to check the tins under which congregated handfulls of *Diadophis punctatus* (Ringneck Snakes). I think he quickly realized that what I lacked in IQ points I easily compensated for in enthusiasm. He encouraged me to initiate research as an undergrad, and eventually became my advisor when I entered graduate school at Kansas. While still at Kansas, and long after I had moved on to the Milwaukee Public Museum, we spent time in the field. We worked on *Anolis* in Mexico, Great Corn Island off the coast of Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic, and on iguana (*Ctenosaura* and *Iguana*) ecology, behav-

ior, and conservation in Belize and Nicaragua. We described new species of anoles, presented details on the social behavior of anoles and iguanids, and documented the exploitation of iguanas in Central America (see article on p. 63).

Cumulatively, we've spent months together in the field. One of my most vivid memories was spending six weeks traveling in southern Mexico in his truck and camper. Every dinner for those six weeks consisted of boiled potatoes and fried Spam. I still like Spam, but I cannot stomach a boiled potato. While in Mexico, we ate cold cereal with powdered milk for breakfast each morning. One morning we were out of milk and I suggested we have sandwiches. Dr. Fitch looked incredulous and replied: "For breakfast?" He opted to have his cereal with plain water and admitted that it wasn't very good. Henry is a creature of habit.

Long before I knew him, Henry Fitch was already a living legend. His long-term field studies of snake populations at the University of Kansas field station are data-rich and amazingly thorough. He brought mark and recapture studies of snakes into the forefront of herpetology, and he was a true pioneer in the use of radio-telemetry to study movement ecology and habitat use by a variety of snake species. In 1999, he published his landmark book, *A Kansas Snake Community: Composition and Changes Over 50 Years* (Krieger Publ. Co.).



Henry Fitch and Bob Henderson measuring a Haitian Boa (*Epicrates striatus*) at Paraiso, Barahona, Dominican Republic (March 1985). Photographs by N.E. Kraucunas.

The likelihood of another researcher being in a professional situation to conduct a similar study, much less to have the drive, enthusiasm, and good health to do it, are virtually nil.

It wasn't until 1965 at the age of 55 that Dr. Fitch finally made it to the tropics. Once there, however, tropical fieldwork became his passion. He eventually spent a solid year in Costa Rica with his family in order to study the population ecology of a wide variety of lizards. After that, any year (especially during the long Kansas winters) that did not include at least one trip to somewhere (anywhere!) in Central or South America or the West Indies was considered disappointing. He was especially interested in *Anolis* ecology and behavior, and has published on a wide range of topics related to their biology, including taxonomy, behavior, and ecology.

In 1976, we were awarded a small grant to study iguana exploitation in Central America. We worked together in Nicaragua for about six weeks before I returned to the U.S. At about 65 years of age, when other folks are thinking about retirement and taking it easy, Henry set-off on his own to visit markets all over Central America in order to document the extent of exploitation of *Ctenosaura similis* and *Iguana iguana*. By interviewing vendors and hunters, he was able to map a network of iguana black marketeers, with truckloads of the lizards going across borders from one country to another. The next year, we spent several weeks in the Belize City cemetery watching the interactions of a healthy population of *C. similis* (known locally as Wish-willies) using tombstones for basking sites, look-outs for territorial males, and for retreats.

During all of the time I spent with the man, whether on the natural history reservation in Kansas or somewhere in the tropics, I never saw his enthusiasm wane. He was always ready for a new adventure, to collect the next lizard, or record more data. Although I'm 35 years younger than Henry, I would welcome an occasional break in the day to put my feet up and have a cold drink. Dr. Fitch could do that too, but only for about 11 minutes. Then it was: "Bob. Let's go to such and such a place and see what we can find. It's the locality for such and such a critter." — and, of course I would go because I knew that if I didn't I was going to miss seeing something worthwhile



Henry Fitch weighing a *Ctenosaura similis* in Nicaragua (February 1976). Photograph by R.W. Henderson.

and an opportunity to learn something from someone who has forgotten more about lizards and snakes than I'll ever know.

I'm proud to have been Henry Fitch's student and frequent collaborator, and I can't tell you how much it pleases me that a 93-year-old man who (supposedly) can barely get around is excited about initiating a new project with Timber Rattlesnakes. Decades after it no longer mattered to his professional "status," Dr. Fitch has continued to conduct natural history studies in Kansas and the American tropics and to publish in scientific journals. He continues to do it because his desire to add to our knowledge of squamate ecology has never waned. His life is testimony to passion and doing what you can to satisfy that passion.

