Henry Fitch at Home and in the Tropics

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I was, herpetologically speaking, incredibly green when I entered the University of Kansas as an undergraduate in 1967. The attraction of KU was its long history of herpetological fieldwork in the Neotropics, and I was aware of the ambitious research program of William Duellman and his students in, at that time, Ecuador. I was not, however, aware of the existence of Henry Fitch. I did know that I wanted to study the way snakes lived, but I had absolutely no idea of how to do it or that anyone was already doing it. Eventually, while browsing through the library in the herpetology division, I came across *Autecology of the Copperhead*. I read it from cover to cover, realized this was the kind of research I wanted to do, and I had to meet Dr. Fitch, who just happened to teach at KU.

The Fitches lived on the grounds of KU's Natural History Reservation and I became a frequent visitor, often making the rounds of coverboards (sheets of tin) in Quarry Field to collect the Prairie Ring-necked Snakes on which Dr. Fitch was then working. I have fond memories of the warm hospitality of Virginia Fitch, energetic basketball games played on the bare ground at the Reservation, the Fitch's yellow VW bug with the smiling happy face stuck to the roof, and of many seemingly carefree hours tramping over the Reservation and encountering Osage Copperheads, Eastern Yellow-bellied Racers, and Prairie Kingsnakes. Despite the time we spent together while I was an undergrad, I somehow convinced Dr. Fitch to take me on as a graduate student, and thus began a 30-year collaboration.

Although my primary interest was in snake ecology, and Dr. Fitch's long-term snake population studies continued to be the focus of his Kansas fieldwork, we never collaborated on a research project with an ophidian concentration. Our tropical fieldwork always had lizards as our primary objective. Mexico was the scene for our first field trip together, primarily in the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca, to collect ecological and morphological data on various species of *Anolis*. This was followed by travels in Nicaragua and Belize for work on the conservation of *Iguana* and *Ctenosaura*, and then more Mexican fieldwork (where one night he suggested we bathe in the Pacific at about 10 pm; I was terrified, certain some creature would lop off my legs while I tried to get clean). Aside from the many hours spent in a truck or jeep, once at a site there was little downtime. On weekends in Nicaragua, we did not have access to the jeep and driver provided for iguana work, but Dr. Fitch knew that anoles awaited us somewhere, so off we went with local transportation, never quite knowing where we were headed or if we'd get back to our quarters in Managua. It was exhausting fun.

I became enamored of the West Indies in the late 1970s, and was pleased when Dr. Fitch joined me in the Dominican Republic (DR) for a project with *Anolis bahorucoensis* in 1985. I know he had a good time in the DR because he kept commenting on the numbers of lizards encountered everywhere all the time. He came up with one wonderful idea after another on how best to study this elusive anole. He later returned to the DR to study the invasive *Anolis cristatellus* and its impact on native anoles in the La Romana area. Cumulatively, we spent months together doing fieldwork in the tropics. Dr. Fitch's energy and enthusiasm for looking for lizards and snakes never waned and, although I was much younger than he, it was not always easy to keep up with him. He had no qualms about sleeping in crummy hotels and, despite his diabetes, he could be pretty malleable when it came to food (although we ate Spam and boiled potatoes *every* night for six weeks in Mexico). I sense Dr. Fitch never lost the enthusiasm I last observed more than 20 years ago, and that's been borne out by his incredible productivity well into his 90s. As he noted in an interview conducted by his daughter in 2000 (Echelle and Stewart, 2000), "interest in reptiles and amphibians has been a dominant influence in my life, and other interests have seemed relatively minor." I recall him telling me about one of his KU colleagues who went off on a two-week fishing trip. He intimated that he would not be able to stand doing that, and seemed genuinely perplexed that his colleague could forego research for that long.

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Henry Fitch and a Boa Constrictor; February 1972 in Chiapas, Mexico.

Dr. Fitch was the ideal collaborator: He always met deadlines (and expected the same from me), and was generous in sharing authorship. I'm sure I must have tried his patience many times (while a student, often showing up at his home unannounced to discuss some "important" issue), but he never visibly lost it. Even a minor falling-out was quickly forgotten. He did, however, at one time inform me that I was no John Lynch or Marty Crump!

While he was alive, Henry Fitch was an inspiration to me and I consider myself amazingly fortunate to have been one of his students and collaborators. He remains my herpetological inspiration and I'm confident that his incredible body of work will continue to inspire researchers for many decades to come. We spoke infrequently on the phone during his last years on the Reservation (and before moving in with his daughter and son-in-law in Stillwater, Oklahoma), but one of our last conversations was my favorite. I don't recall the exact wording, but you'll get the idea.

RWH: So, you must be, what, 91 or 92 now?
HSF (chuckling): No, 93.
RWH: Well, how're you doing?
HSF: Not so great. I have a bad hip and my back is painful, so getting around is difficult.
RWH: I'm sorry to hear that. No fieldwork, I guess.
HSF: Ah, well I just came back from radio-tracking six Timber Rattlesnakes.
RWH (shaking his head in awe and admiration): Amazing.

I always hoped he knew how much he had influenced my efforts and I was looking forward to sending him a copy of a forthcoming book on

the natural history of West Indian amphibians and reptiles. I doubt that he would've been up to reading it, but I did want him to know that I had written it (with Bob Powell). Perhaps my ego (or insecurity) hoped he'd at least think, "Bob's done OK."

In the Field with Henry Fitch

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I received a phone call from Alice Fitch Echelle in the fall of my junior year at Baylor University. I knew Alice, Henry Fitch's daughter, through her husband Tony Echelle. Tony was teaching a graduate course in Systematics at Baylor, and had given me permission to enroll in his class as an undergraduate. That course opened my eyes to the exciting possibilities of phylogenetics. Tony and Alice often let me come along on their many field trips to collect fishes throughout Texas, so Alice knew that I was enthusiastic about fieldwork.

Over the phone, Alice described how her father had received a small grant to study the impact of human exploitation of iguanas for food, and was planning a semester-long field trip through Mexico and Central America. As Henry was nearing retirement, Alice was worried about him making the trip alone, and she knew that I had a passion for anything to do with herpetology. She wanted to know if I was interested in taking off a semester from school and accompanying Henry in the field. "I would love to do it, but I'll need to think about it," I said, as I considered how delaying my graduation by a semester might affect my future plans for graduate school. I hung up the phone and thought for about 30 seconds, then called Alice back. "I'll do it…when do we leave?" That was the extent of the background and the planning for what was to be my most educational semester as an undergraduate.

I was already quite familiar with Henry Fitch through his books and research articles. I had met him the previous summer as he visited Alice and Tony, when I asked him to sign my copy of his book, *Reproductive Cycles of Lizards and Snakes*. I remember that he was pleased to see that my copy of the book was worn and obviously heavily used. Henry had been embarrassed and modest, acting as if he felt honored to be asked by an over-eager undergraduate for his autograph. I couldn't believe that such a famous person could be so modest.

Henry drove down from Kansas and picked me up in Texas in early January, in an old International Harvester pickup with a well-worn camper in the bed, which was to be our home for the next four months. We crossed into Mexico the next day, and I learned very quickly that there was little justification for Henry's modest demeanor. I asked questions about everything we saw, and rarely did I manage to stump him. At every camping site, I caught practically every herp, fish, insect, spider, crustacean, and mammal that I could find, and Henry told me something about them all. He frequently also would explain fundamental concepts of geology, climate, ecology, and just about every other aspect of natural history as we slowly moved south through Mexico into Central America. His impromptu lectures stimulated me to write long entries in my field journal every evening.

The funded purpose of the trip was to study iguana exploitation, and we did that. But Henry was fascinated with anoles, and it became clear to me that Henry was much more interested in studying the systematics, ecology, and behavior of anoles than he was in studying iguanas. That was fine with me; I didn't care what we studied, as long as it was related to herpetology. We traveled fairly slowly, so that we had plenty of time to collect anoles and other herps at every campsite.

I had never before met an adult who was so completely immersed in the study of natural history, so we hit it off immediately. Henry was as enthusiastic about being in the field as I was, at least by day. I was surprised, however, that Henry did not accompany me on my nightly forays into the forests around our campsites after dark. His diabetes had affected his night vision, and so he did not see well at night. But he was always enthusiastic about all the herps I would find and bring back to him in the camper after dark, and we would often stay up late talking about our latest captures and what interesting research problems they might suggest. To Henry, every species provided new questions that were waiting to be answered. I couldn't imagine a more exciting life.

As much as I was enjoying myself, there were a few aspects of Henry's approach to fieldwork that caused me some aggravation. First, he insisted on doing all the driving, even though I'd been asked by Alice to accompany Henry on the basis that he would need some help. Given his poor night vision, his night-driving proved quite frightening to everyone on the road except Henry, and more than once I was convinced we would drive off one of the many precipitous roadsides in the mountains of Central America. Eventually, I insisted that he had to let me drive at night, or else I would only get in the truck with him by day. We drove only by day from then on; I was still not permitted to drive the old International Harvester pickup.

A second minor aggravation was what can generously be described as Henry's rather parsimonious nature. We bought and cooked all our own food, which was fine with me, except that Henry was a straight Midwestern meat-and-potatoes man, and we almost never had any meat. So we ate mostly potatoes. After the first few weeks of a steady potato diet, I was getting desperate for something I could taste. I started buying a few peppers and spices from the markets on the sly, and catching land crabs, freshwater prawns, and fish from the streams around our campsites. Soon I was cooking up two meals: boiled potatoes for Henry, and a spicy concoction of whatever I could catch around our campsites for me. Henry politely tried my attempts at culinary diversity a few times, but he always returned to potatoes for dinner. Sometimes, for excitement, he would put a little salt and pepper or butter on them, or even add a scrambled egg when he was feeling extravagant.

Other than gasoline (which cost about 30 cents a gallon in Mexico at the time), I think Henry was spending less than a dollar a day for all our other living expenses. So when we reached the Guatemala–El Salvador border on a Saturday in February, and Henry discovered that the weekend fee for crossing the border was 50 cents/person, but that the weekday rate was 25 cents, we of course had to turn around and camp out in Guatemala until Monday morning to save 50 cents. At our Guatemalan campsite near the border, I found synbranchid eels in a small stream, and I had a blast figuring out how to catch them (and I still have fond memories of *Synbranchus* stew). By Sunday I had to hang my clothes out to dry, and some locals who had been drinking decided to take advantage of the situation. They grabbed my clothes and ran, and I briefly gave chase, until one of them turned and pulled out a machete. I returned to camp and suggested to Henry that we might want to find a new camping spot. Henry did not seem very interested in doing so until rocks started raining down on us from the cliff above our campsite. We pulled out just as a large rock smashed our windshield. When I last saw that pickup many years later, that broken windshield had never been repaired.

On Monday morning after the windshield-smashing event, we arrived at the border at 8 AM, just when the weekend rate was supposed to change back to the weekday rate. But after the customary spraying of the truck with DDT (a ritual that was practiced on both sides of every Central American border), the border official charged us 50 cents a person. Henry objected, and pointed to the clock on the wall, which said 8:05 AM. The border official calmly went to the clock, changed the time to 7:55, and charged us the weekend rate. It was one of the few times in four months I saw Henry mad about anything. For the most part, he would roll with whatever life dished out, and make the best of every situation.

Our study of human exploitation of iguanas and ctenosaurs reached a peak during Lent, when the markets of Central America became well stocked with these large lizards. Lizard is not considered "meat" by many people who give up meat for Lent, so iguanas and ctenosaurs were sold and