



DAVID HILLIS

Henry Fitch examining an iguana in a market in El Salvador, February 1979.

eaten by the thousands during this time. But after Lent, we were back into the mountains, looking for more species of anoles. By then, we had hatched a project to study intra- and interspecific variation of anole dewlaps, and were busy collecting series of as many species as we could locate.

One might think that it would have been a physical mismatch to pair a young strapping undergraduate with a professor nearing retirement on an extended field trip. It was...I had a hard time keeping up with Henry. He wasn't fast, but he never stopped. He could walk all day up steep mountainsides in pursuit of the next species of anole, and we did so just about every day. Some years later, as a graduate student at the University of Kansas, I would take public education classes of schoolchildren out to the KU Natural History Reservation where Henry and his wife Virginia lived. Even well into his "retirement" years, Henry took great pride in leaving kids in the dust. As he cruised through the Reservation, he would grab snakes as he walked, checking their ventral clips for individual identification. "Aha! It's female number 1675! I have captured this racer more than 300 times in her life...I am glad to see that she is still alive." The kids were always wide-eyed with amazement, as they stood there trying to catch their breath before Henry rushed off to the next snake.

As it turned out, Alice need not have worried about Henry's "advancing age" when we set off for our Central American field trip. Henry remained active in the field for another three decades after that trip... a full career for many people. Henry collected more data after he "retired" than most people collect in their lifetimes. I doubt anyone will ever be able to repeat the kind of long-term autecological studies that he perfected. But more than the specific knowledge that I learned from Henry, what I admired most about him was his child-like enthusiasm for nature and everything in it, and his unquenchable need to ask questions about everything he encountered. Several gen-

erations of herpetologists benefited from his wisdom, his kindness, and his passion. Mention his name to anyone who ever met him, and you will get a smile and a story. I can't think of a better legacy for a great naturalist who squeezed so much out of such a long and productive life. Henry, we will all miss you, but we will smile every time your name is mentioned.

Natural History Observations of Henry Fitch

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The Second World Congress of Herpetology was held in Adelaide, Australia in 1994. One symposium was on the biology of snakes, and Henry Fitch was a presenter. For many in the audience, this was their first time to hear the legend in person. So as Henry walked to the podium, the audience's initial mood (or at least mine) was one of excitement, anticipation, and respect.

Henry gave an amazing talk. The theme was long-term (really long-term!) demographic trends of all of the snakes on the Kansas Natural History Reserve. The results were stunning but depressing: The density of essentially every species had declined over time.

The audience (largely snake buffs of the first order) quickly became somber. Adding to the poignancy of the moment, we all recognized that this grim result was being delivered by a kind and gentle man whose deep love for snakes and their natural history had inspired him to carry out a life-long study of these snakes. But the clear conclusion emerging from all of his immense work was that his beloved subjects were declining to extinction. Sometimes, life doesn't seem fair.

Either in his talk, or in the question period afterwards, Henry noted that a primary cause was a policy of suppressing fires on the Reserve: as a result, succession was unchecked, such that habitats on the reserve were increasingly forested and increasingly unfavorable to snakes.

Someone asked, "Why don't you light a fire?" Henry thought for a moment, and then replied quietly, "I can't do that." My distinct impression at the time was that he really did want to do just that, but that he couldn't do so ethically, given his position at the Reserve.

But I also remember distinctly feeling at the time that Henry was sending a subliminal message to us in the audience: "If you want to start a fire..."

For me, Henry's talk was certainly among the most memorable ones of the entire Congress. Moreover, its central lesson still haunts my thoughts. We should do science because we love the process, not because we need to love the results. Henry Fitch could not have loved the results of his work, but there's no doubt he loved the process.

Memories of Henry Fitch

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Henry Fitch was one of the most gracious, kind, and gentle men I have ever known. I greatly respected him for his long list of professional achievements, but I also respected him for the man he was and how he treated others. He was always the gentle encourager to me and I often think of his example when I get in an exasperating situation with my students or colleagues. I never heard a degrading word spoken against Henry the man

by anyone. Any and all who happened to come by the Natural History Reservation were heartily welcomed by Henry and his lovely wife Virginia, and that seemed to happen frequently.

My formal association with Henry began in July 1972 when I came to KU to begin a Ph.D. program. I found it difficult to believe I had the opportunity to work with such a professional giant. I remember standing in awe as we spoke about potential research projects and thinking that since Henry was 64 at the time, I just might be his last student before he retired (wrong! I only missed by about 30 years). Henry was THE man as far as snake ecology was concerned and I assumed my dissertation would become yet another monograph of a Reservation snake species. But then he suggested we go down on the “Kaw” (Kansas River) to look for softshell turtles. I was fascinated by the sandbars, the softshells, and Henry’s nonstop fountain of knowledge about them – talk about information overload! But what I remember most about our inaugural softshell trip was this 27-yr-old kid in the prime of life trying desperately to keep up with an aging 64-yr-old walking (more like running) on the soft sand as he talked. I looked for a red “S” on his chest.

Henry once had a guest at the Reservation, a gentleman from the Bombay Natural History Society, and because India is near the center of softshell diversity, Henry asked me to take the gentleman out on the Kaw and show him our American softshells. By that time, I had captured hundreds of *Apalone mutica* and I assured Henry that it would be no problem seeing numerous softshells. Any field biologist could probably guess what happened. After working hard for a couple of hours, we saw maybe two or three juvenile softshells. I learned that day that one should never make such rash statements regardless of how confident he is about seeing animals in the field. Henry was apologetic to the gentleman and I was embarrassed, but Henry never said another word about it to me.

Henry frequently encouraged his students to do “interesting” side projects along with their thesis or dissertation work. He suggested a project on softshell glands in the summer of 1972 that would fit in “nicely” with my ecological Ph.D. work. Being a swamped and overwhelmed new grad student, I wasn’t terribly interested in his suggestion at the time, but I never forgot it (probably because of who suggested it). Well Henry, you would be pleased to know that I finally did do the project and it was published in 2009 just before you left us. Sorry I’m so slow; it only took 37 years. Thanks for the treasured memories.

Henry Fitch as a Mentor and Teacher

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Most herpetologists today know Henry S. Fitch only as a name on his classic papers and monographs (e. g., *Autecology of the Copperhead*, *A Kansas Snake Community*). In this remembrance, I would like to give my perspective on Henry in the roles I knew him best, as a mentor and teacher.

In 1979, all I knew about Henry Fitch was his outstanding publication record. I had been accepted to the Ph.D. program at the University of Kansas for the fall 1979 semester, and, through a series of letters, Henry had tentatively agreed to accept me as his doctoral student. However, he had cautioned me that he was retiring in 1980 and that I might want to reconsider coming to KU as his final student. Thus, in June 1979, my wife Nadia and I drove to Kansas to meet Henry and his wife Virginia for the first time. Little did I know that this initial meeting would lead to a 30 year relationship with Henry and Virginia and that my appreciation and respect for them would go far beyond anything I might have expected.

As we drove on the unpaved entrance road leading to Henry’s house on the KU Natural History Reservation (now the Fitch Natural History Reservation), I saw numerous metal coverboards (“shelters” in Henry’s ter-

minology) and drift fences scattered at what appeared to be random intervals along the road. As soon as we reached the small, incredibly modest house where the Fitches lived on the Reservation, Henry and Virginia were out the front door to greet us. Almost immediately, I gained an insight into Henry’s character: Knowing what to call your presumptive major professor is always a delicate proposition for a new student (“Dr. Fitch?” “Professor Fitch?”), but Henry dealt with that by holding out his hand and introducing himself as “Henry Fitch,” and we were on a first name basis from then on. Virginia went even further and gave Nadia and me a huge hug, inviting us in for lunch.

Feeling much more at ease, we only got to the Fitch’s front porch when I saw that there were a large series of jars, cans, and snake bags, all holding various live herps. Asking Henry where these came from, he proceeded to tell us that was today’s catch and then tell much more about the ecology and natural history of his “finds” than four years of field work and reading had provided me so far. I was struck especially by the detailed notes Henry took on each find and how much data he was extracting from each individual.

After lunch, Henry suggested that we do “a round” of his traps and shelters, and the two of us set off up the hillside by the house. Within minutes I discovered that this 69-year-old man was in better shape than most grad students, as he went up the hill on what felt like a trot. As we went, he began to tell me a detailed history of what felt like every tree and critter we saw. Phrases such as “I am hearing a Yellow-billed Cuckoo” were thrown out casually, leading to two thoughts I dared not express: “I thought this was a herpetologist” and “I am glad YOU are hearing this, since I surely don’t!”

I was thrilled when we came to the first series of shelters at what was known as Quarry Field, since the pace finally slowed down and Henry said this was the best place to see Copperheads. Sure enough, there were two gorgeous Copperheads curled up under the first shelter we flipped and they were right in front of Henry. Problem was, there were also four Ringneck Snakes right in front of me, and, while I had eyes only for the Copperheads (and did



Henry Fitch used funnel traps and drift fences to capture many of the snakes on the Natural History Reservation.