

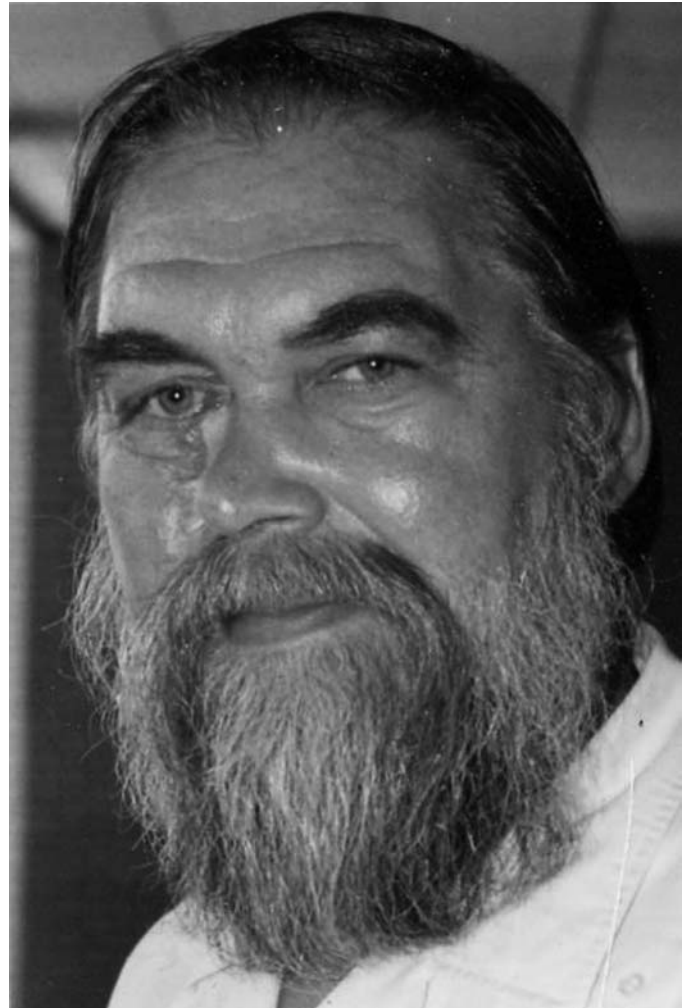
## OBITUARY

### JOHN FREDERICK EISENBERG: 1935–2003

Dr. John F. Eisenberg, scientist, teacher, and mentor of remarkable intellectual breadth, died Sunday, 6 July 2003, at his home in Bellingham, Washington. He was 68. John's indefatigable spirit, contagious passion for knowledge, and sheer scientific brilliance earned him a reputation as one of the foremost mammalian biologists in the world. He lived his life with passion and a fierce sense of purpose, and was a remarkably colorful and unforgettable personality. John was a Fellow of the Animal Behavior Society and the New York Zoological Society, as well as recipient of the C. Hart Merriam Award, the highest research honor bestowed by the American Society of Mammalogists. In 2001 he was the corecipient of the Archie F. Carr Medal award by the University of Florida for his contributions to wildlife conservation. Eisenberg wrote more than 150 major scientific publications on the ecology, behavior, and evolution of mammals. In biological circles, he was recognized as a "big picture" person. His ability to synthesize diverse knowledge culminated in the publication of *The Mammalian Radiations: An Analysis of Adaptation, Ecology, and Behavior*, a book published in 1982 by the University of Chicago Press. He completed the encyclopedic 3-volume *Mammals of the Neotropics* in 2000 with coauthor Kent Redford.

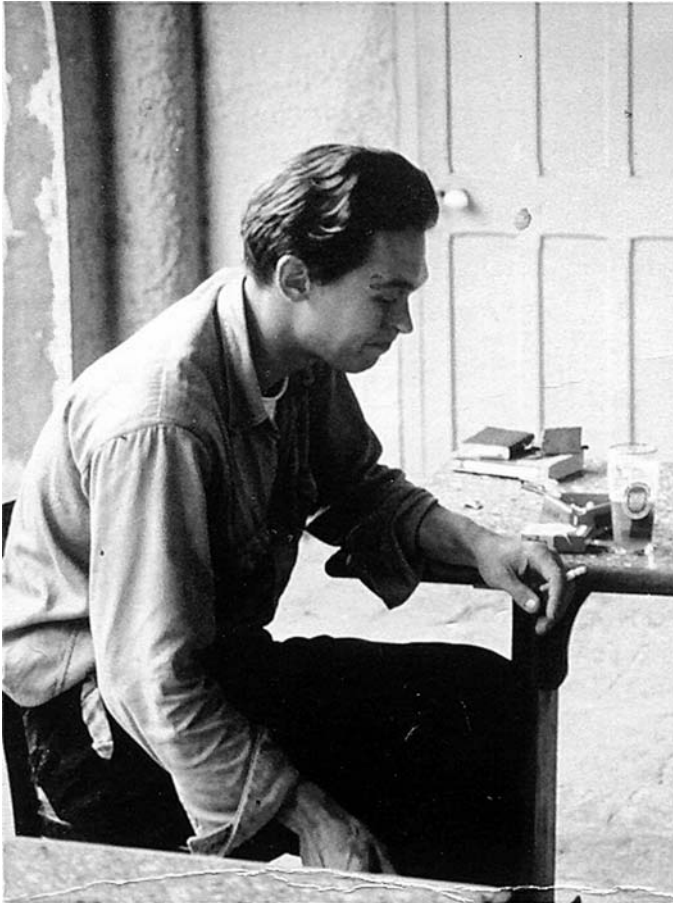
John was born in Everett, Washington, the 1st of 2 sons of Otto and Bernice nee Sessions Eisenberg. It was a close-knit family. Everett was then one of the great mill towns of the Northwest, and John was drawn to wildlife and fishing with his father, brother, and uncles Carl and Boots. If John wasn't born with a fierce sense of independence and individualism, he doubtless learned those qualities from his roving, adventurous uncles. He became a compulsive reader at a young age, and frequently visited Everett's library and its little zoo, a legacy from Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal. For a 6th grade class project, he drew a very large, complex plan for a zoo, which included many design features attuned to proper husbandry. A turning point in his youth was the discovery of a magazine article that showed how to build a live trap from a quart juice can and a mousetrap. He began trapping local rodents, which he observed as pets. It became a lasting passion.

John worked in several mills during the summer to put himself through college. One of his favorite stories took place the summer he worked as a "sorter" at Walton's plywood mill. The 1st day on the job was going well, but when the saws began to buzz after lunch a piercing scream rose above the drone. "I was sure someone had fallen into the blade," and he rushed to an old millhand to help. "Never mind, son," hollered the bemused worker. "It's only old Gus. He's deaf and has the piles. Can't hear himself when he's in the crapper."



John Eisenberg in his later years at the University of Florida. (Photographer unknown.)

John decided early in life to break with the family tradition, go to college, and escape from life in the mill town. It was not a decision based on disdain, for John identified strongly with his roots in the working class, and retained a soft place for "the common man" throughout his life. He enrolled at Washington State University at Pullman, where Helmut K. Buechner was one of his instructors. There he married Ellen Franzen. After graduating with honors, he was accepted to graduate school in zoology at the University of California, Berkeley, where he did his master's degree and Ph.D. under Peter Marler, who was heading up a new program in ethology. He published one of his



John Eisenberg in Madagascar during a trip with Ed Gould in 1966. (Photograph by Edwin Gould.)

graduate student projects, *The social organizations of mammals*, as a monograph in the *Handbuch der Zoologie*. John's theses on social organization of *Peromyscus* and comparative ethology of heteromyid rodents represented a progression of syntheses that continued throughout his life.

In 1962 John took his 1st academic position as an assistant professor of zoology at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver. During the next 2 years he began his "stable of graduate students" and expanded the taxonomic scope of his research with studies of insectivores and spider monkeys. In 1964, he left UBC to join the zoology faculty at the University of Maryland, where a strong program in ethology was developing. John was immediately drawn to the National Zoo, where the recently retired curator, Ernest P. Walker, had assembled an eclectic collection of small mammals. He was at the right place at the right time. Theodore H. Reed, Director of the National Zoo, had been toying with the idea of hiring a scientist to oversee scientific studies of the animal collection. When the lean and articulate 30-year-old Eisenberg paid him a visit, Reed knew he had met the person who could make it happen. In 1965 Reed hired John as the National Zoo's Resident Scientist. Eisenberg's advent at the zoo was a pivotal event in the zoo's history, and his subsequent adjunct status at the University of Maryland opened the zoo's doors to graduate studies.

Reed made good his promises. John agreed to collect live animals for the zoo in exchange for the privilege to conduct fieldwork overseas, and Reed assigned both the zoo's best secretary (Wy Holden) and most experienced keeper (Gene Maliniak) to John's fledgling Scientific Research Department. A large room on the top of the reptile house and the vast dungeonlike basement of the lion house were soon filled with splendidly crafted cages containing an assortment of caviomorph rodents, dasyurid marsupials, tenrecs, moonrats, and solenodons. At its peak, 3 full-time keepers took care of the live-animal collection. It was a place where "things went bump in the night," and graduate students stayed after hours to behold the strange creatures that smelled like rotten garlic or stridulated with quills. The plumbing system in the late lion house was medieval at best, and those making pilgrimages to see the collection learned to promptly evacuate the building at 1000 h. That was when the keepers flushed the drains of the large cat cages upstairs.

John organized or was co-principle investigator in 3 international field projects during his Smithsonian years. Shortly after he arrived, he paid a visit to Ed Gould at Johns Hopkins University, saw his tenrec collection, and learned of his studies in Madagascar. Ed invited him to become a partner. John packed his young family to Madagascar to join Ed for fieldwork and collecting. They returned with more tenrecs, and eventually an assortment of Malagasy carnivores arrived at the zoo, including a fossa (*Cryptoprocta ferox*), fanalokas (*Fossa fossana*), and ring-tailed mongooses (*Galidia elegans*). All-night stints at the zoo making observations became routine. At the same time, Maliniak's painstaking attentions to husbandry generated new insights into tenrec reproductive biology. When John and Ed published their monograph, *The Tenrecs*, they drew parallels between the societies of insectivores and elephants. It was clear that the work was a segue to studies of other mammalian orders.

As the leader and coordinator of the Ceylon and Venezuela projects, John inspired his coworkers and students by example and compelling personality. His old mentor from Washington State University, Hal Buechner, was by then a Smithsonian ecologist. Buechner secured Public Law 480 funds for the first 2 years of the Ceylon project, but in 1967 John became principle investigator and again packed up his family to join his students and coworkers overseas. He orchestrated research collaborations in 4 protected areas, including primate studies with Suzanne Ripley, Gil Manley, and Ted Grand; elephant studies with Fred Kurt; and botanical investigations by Ray Fosberg, Dietrich Mueller-Dombois, and Marcel and Annette Hladik. He also taught courses at the University of Ceylon, where he recruited Ceylonese counterparts for each project, almost all of whom received at least master's degrees for their work.

Although John burned the candle at both ends, the Ceylon Project was a particularly intense and turbulent chapter of his life. He was working at full throttle, publishing nonstop, giving papers, and managing the project. His students and colleagues back home eagerly awaited news from the field, which could be counted upon to stir the imagination. One day a box of 35-mm slides arrived with a telling picture. Hunkered before a pile of elephant dung and grinning maniacally was our advisor poised

to bite into the giant road apple. A poster made from that slide decorated the department for many years. Inevitably, the project took its toll on the marriage, and John returned to the states vowing to dedicate more time to family and home. John's lifelong friend, Gene Wood recalls John's solemn declaration, "I'm going to spend more time with the family, be a better father, and buy a lawnmower. And maybe I'll even become a volunteer fireman." Not long afterward, in his last woeful act of domestic responsibility before moving out of the house, he cut off 2 toes with the new mower. Gene recalls going to the hospital, and finding John on a gurney being questioned by an officious nurse. Nurse: "Mr. Eisenberg, you lost 2 toes, but there was only 1 in your shoe." John: "That's correct." Nurse: "Well, what happened to the other one?" With the characteristic insouciance he reserved for such occasions John replied. "Twinkles ate it!" Indeed, the family cat had eaten the toe. A week later John was late getting to a graduate student party, but with bandaged foot and crutches he danced to Zorba the Greek. The crutches knocked a few pictures to the floor, but the students loved it.

The dissolution of John's marriage in 1969 was a painful experience. John retained custody of the children, Karl and Elise, and threw himself into a number of projects. He published his Ceylon findings, coedited the Smithsonian's Man and Beast Symposium with Wilton Dillon, and rekindled his interest in the Neotropics. During this period he met Devra Kleiman, who joined the departmental staff as a reproductive biologist, and they married in 1971. Together they comanaged the zoo's research program, and enjoyed a productive professional partnership. John's 1st generation of graduate students were starting to finish their degrees, and there was no shortage of prospective students seeking to work with him. John initiated the Symposia of the National Zoological Park, and successfully lobbied for the hiring of a number of curators who were professionally trained biologists. By the mid-1970s, John had established his credentials internationally as a scientist of extraordinary vision and energy. By then, the facilities in the basement of the lion house were long gone, replaced by a building reserved wholly for research and veterinary medicine. Under Eisenberg's leadership, the National Zoo had become one of the foremost research zoos in the country, and the Conservation and Research Center, which characterized his core intellectual values of field science, observation, education, and scholarship, all in the most unpretentious atmosphere, became the jewel in the zoo's crown.

As a consequence, the zoo became a whistle stop for a growing number of luminaries of the "old guard"—Heini Hediger, Paul Leyhausen, Griff Ewer, Desmond Morris, and Gerald Durrell to mention a few, and the house on 16th Street NW became a frequent party venue and an oasis of sorts for itinerant graduate students. Karl's pet snakes and hamsters were often "at large," which fueled the family drama. John recounted these episodes as a tragicomic domestic saga, which didn't necessarily help matters, but were far more entertaining than any creative essay one hears on National Public Radio.

John's attraction to Latin America as a theater of mammalian evolution grew. He published a monograph on spider monkey

communication, and launched Gene Montgomery and Mel Sunquist, both seasoned radiotrackers, in their investigations of 2-toed and 3-toed sloth ecology on the Smithsonian's field station at Barro Colorado Island, Panama. In 1977 he initiated the Venezuela Project, which continues today. At about the same time, Reed promoted him to assistant director of the zoo's animal programs, and he began his grand synthesis of mammalian evolution—*The Mammalian Radiations: An Analysis of Adaptation, Ecology, and Behavior*. He harnessed himself to a deadline that few others could manage, but the undertaking gave him great satisfaction. Even when socializing, his 1st order of business was to share his emerging ideas and penciled graphs with his colleagues. The book was the culmination of his work at the National Zoo.

In 1982, John accepted the Katharine Ordway Chair in Ecosystem Conservation at the University of Florida (UF) in Gainesville, where he held the title of Eminent Scholar. At this juncture, Devra and John decided mutually to terminate their marriage, but remained on good terms. The transition to the university was natural, because many of his colleagues, including Brian McNab, Ralph Wetzel, Hank Setzer, and former postdoctoral student, John Robinson, were living in Gainesville or were on the faculty. John married Brenda J. Sigler a year later, and enjoyed many hours babysitting grandchildren.

After reviewing the academic programs at UF, John asked, "Where is the field school?" Finding that there wasn't one, he volunteered Mel Sunquist, Dick Franz, and himself to put together a field techniques course on the Ordway Preserve. The 1st course was conducted in May 1984. It is still ongoing and evolving, having trained more than 600 wildlife undergraduates to date. John handled the small mammal trapping exercise, and dazzled the students with his knowledge, folksy stories, and ease with which he gently manipulated the tiny critters out of the cloth bag for show and tell. They were equally impressed with his yellow socks, which were pulled up over his cuffs and reeked of rotten eggs; they were relieved to learn that dusting one's socks with sulfur powder was sound jungle lore rather than treatment for athlete's foot. John was the "universal donor" to every biting, sucking, piercing, chewing insect known to man and religiously used the powder in a valiant effort to thwart the attacks of chiggers and ticks. Unfortunately, he was still vulnerable to the flying beasts, which often left his hands and face puffed up like a toad. An inveterate field man, he never missed a field class during his time at UF.

The Ordway Chair had no teaching responsibilities, but John loved to teach and never failed to captivate his audience. In addition to Wildlife Techniques, John regularly taught Mammalogy with Charles Woods, Wildlife Ecology, Mammals of South America, Advanced Mammalogy, Behavioral and Ecological Mammalogy, as well as the occasional course on special topics. After a leave in Tasmania in 1990, for example, John taught a course on Conservation of Carnivorous Mammals, where thylacines (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*) and Tasmanian devils (*Sarcophilus laniarius*) figured prominently. He also joined forces with Larry Harris to teach a course on Biological Conservation in Africa, and he later taught a course



John in the field doing what he loved most (Hato Masaguaral, Venezuela, circa 1980). (Photograph by Don Wilson.)

on Mammal Introductions with Mike Moulton. John's daunting knowledge of mammalian biogeography provided penetrating insights into the impacts of introduced species.

John brought a remarkable presence to the classroom. Shuffling in with his worn yellow lecture notes marked with neatly penciled annotations, he would arrange his notes, and pause to look over his reading glasses at the class. Then the baritone voice began. He was the master narrator, weaving together the pieces and characters, sometimes going to the blackboard to produce a detailed map or animal sketch. The lectures became stories, told with the eloquence that only John could command. John's dramatic flair and skills as a mimic never failed him. During one mesmerizing lecture on mating systems, John launched into a transcendental evocation of the bull elk in rut, complete with bugling. When the lecture was over, the class rose in a standing ovation.

Graduate students were frequent visitors to John's office. He never failed to awe them as he rattled off citations and then turned to the books of his vast library. The glimpses, hints, and other avenues of inquiry he suggested were often real nuggets. What a resource he was. His door was always open, but his approachability increased when university policy forced him to smoke outside. With a cup of coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other, John could predictably be found in the museum's courtyard. Inevitably 1 or more students would stop to ask a question between classes. John relished the intellectual stimulation, and in this strange courtlike setting he truly was in fine form. No matter how mundane the subject, his views were never commonplace. Except perhaps, for his attire, where it was not unusual to see a bit of belly or the crack of his derriere.

John's depth and breadth made him a valued committee member, and he willingly served on more than 100 graduate student committees from departments across campus. To this service must be added his own students, and he graduated 20

master's and 19 doctoral students at UF. His students were an international assemblage, representing at least 15 countries.

No account of Eisenberg would be complete without mentioning his stories. Whether a personal account of some trial of life (fighting to retain sanity while stranded on the Orinoco), or a woeful tale of someone's grief (the bodice-ripping tale of the little green frog in the bathing tank on the llanos), Eisenberg was a consummate storyteller. A telling tribute to John's persona took place in 1978, during a trip to the mammal meetings in Athens, Georgia. After a long day's drive, John and his students checked into a motel, had a quick wash, and convened at the restaurant for dinner and much needed libations. The place was empty except for 2 women dining several tables away. Our mentor sipped bourbon, reflected somewhat surrealistically on the day's ho-hum events, parodied the topics of the meeting's forthcoming presentations, and digressed on the origin of Newton's famous quotation about "standing on the shoulders of giants." As we were leaving the room, the 2 women intercepted our group. Since John seasoned his speech generously with expletives, we expected the worst. "Sir, I would like to introduce myself and my daughter," drawled the woman pleasantly. She confessed that they had been "shamelessly eavesdropping." "My daughter and I found your comments to be most enlightening. I want to thank you, and wish you the best of luck." John took her proffered hand, and in his most courtly demeanor responded, "Why Madam, that's most kind of you to say."

John's gift of oratory was complimented by an omnipresent confidence. His captivating presence in public instantly stood him apart. Even when he was enjoying his 5th glass of Jim Beam, mastery of diction never seemed to fail him. Under those circumstances, John became a 1-man show who could hold forth on a remarkable variety of topics. At these times, he was as likely to recite Wagnerian opera *auf Deutsch*, as to discuss the war of the states, or interpret biblical parable. Dick Thorington recalls a trip with John to Corrientes, Argentina. A family friend had advised Dick to make a courtesy call on a friend, who happened to be the daughter of the former Argentine Ambassador to the United States. The young woman cautiously accepted Dick's invitation to dinner, saying her sister would accompany her. Dick asked John to join them. "Are you sure you want me there?" asked John, forecasting the possibility of embarrassing misbehavior. "Of course I want you there," replied Dick, and together they met the sisters in an upscale restaurant. As they were enjoying dessert the Ambassador made an unannounced appearance—under the polite pretext of being in the neighborhood, but obviously to check out the gringos. When the small talk was over, the subject somehow shifted to law. In Dick's words, "John launched into a most fascinating, learned discourse on the evolution of Napoleonic law." John's erudition was astounding, and the ambassador's wonderment was palpable.

An obituary can hardly do justice to John's life, which had more than its share of discovery, adventure, and original ideas, not to mention a long procession of friends who shared in the journey and its many dramas. He touched many lives. His profession and his personal life were intricately interwoven,

which was often frustrating to his family, and endeared him to his friends. But all who knew him well were enriched by the experience. When Ernst Mayr asked the young Dick Thorington about his new associates at the Smithsonian, Dick reeled off the names, and finished with John Eisenberg. “Now there’s a true scholar,” remarked Mayr. We will all miss that scholar, and his extraordinary persona, but his inspiration will never leave us.

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