

## Professor John Proctor (1944–2006)

Francis Q. Brearley · Laszlo Nagy

Received: 11 January 2007 / Accepted: 29 January 2007 / Published online: 28 February 2007  
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2007

Professor John Proctor, one of the foremost researchers on both the ecology of areas over ultramafic rocks and on tropical forest ecology, sadly passed away on 20th August 2006 in Blackburn, England.

John Proctor was born in 1944 in Accrington, Lancashire, England. He was described in one of his school reports as ‘bright, but a very silly boy’. As a teenager, he was a keen football player, playing in goal, and was obsessed with the local football team. Despite his boyhood aspiration, he was not spotted by their talent scouts. It was his keen mind that was noted at St Mary’s College by the teaching priests, who tried to direct him towards priesthood. However, he obtained a scholarship to the University of Oxford to read botany instead.

He gained a first class degree in 1965 and then stayed on at Oxford to do research for his D.Phil. thesis entitled *Studies in Serpentine Plant Ecology* when he travelled the length of the British Isles many times on his motorcycle. Four important papers were published from this work which set

the agenda for much of his research in later years. After completing his D.Phil. in 1968, John held three short appointments at the Universities of Lancaster, Stanford and Liverpool before moving to Stirling in 1971 to take up a lectureship in biological sciences. Stirling had only been open for a few years at that time but it was well placed to continue work on the British serpentine flora which is situated mostly in the highlands of Scotland. Two particular areas on which he did extensive work were the outcrops near Meikle Kilrannoch in Angus and the Keen of Hamar in the Shetland Islands. In 1975 he published, with Stan Woodell, an extensive review of serpentine ecology which is still important and regularly cited today (Proctor and Woodell 1975).

John was keenly aware of the importance of plant taxonomy in ecological studies and his fruitful collaborations with taxonomists clearly enhanced his ecological work. He was one of the dwindling number of ecologists with excellent botanical skills and his knowledge of the flora and vegetation of the British Isles was admirable. He served as the President of the Botanical Society of Scotland from 1996–1998 and organised and edited a symposium on Scottish vegetation (Proctor 1997), the most important and extensive review in this area for at least thirty years. He also served on the Scientific Advisory Committee of Scottish Natural Heritage, the government body concerned with nature conservation in Scotland.

---

F. Q. Brearley (✉)  
Department of Botany, Trinity College,  
University of Dublin, Dublin 2, Ireland  
e-mail: brearlef@tcd.ie

L. Nagy  
EcoScience Scotland, 2/1, 27 Glencairn Drive,  
Glasgow, G41 4QP, Scotland, UK

John married Sue Fogden in 1974 and their daughter, Katy, was born in 1975. Shortly after this, he was invited to join the Royal Geographical Society's (RGS) year-long expedition to Gunung Mulu in Sarawak on the island of Borneo where his young family accompanied him. The experiences and adventures of the expedition are recounted in Robin Hanbury-Tenison's (1984) fascinating book. During the expedition, in addition to an impressive amount of work on forest structure, floristics and dynamics (e.g. Proctor et al. 1983a, b), John also studied the local language and published a Berawan-English dictionary (Proctor 1979). His interest in local people and culture was maintained throughout his life and led to him being held in high esteem by field assistants everywhere he worked. For example, he was honoured by the Berawan at Gunung Mulu by their custom of renaming: he became Senan, a traditional local hero.

With his combined interest in tropical forests and ultramafic soils, John spent many summers in the 1980s on research expeditions to serpentine areas in south-east Asia: Gunung Silam in Sabah (Malaysia), Mount Bloomfield on Palawan (Philippines) and Mount Guiting-Guiting on Sibuyan Island (Philippines). In addition to studying forest structure, floristics and dynamics and soil and rock chemistry, some new plant species were discovered, including the spectacular *Phyllanthus balgooyi* (Euphorbiaceae) which, with its jade green sap, is one of the most noticeable of the nickel hyperaccumulators (Hoffman et al. 2003). A new *Lobelia* species was also found and has recently been named '*proctorii*' in John's honour by George Argent and Peter Wilkie of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh.

These expeditions were often in collaboration between Stirling and other universities and participating undergraduate students gained good experiences of research and of the adventures to be had in some remote and often mountainous areas. In some cases the adventures were memorable, such as, for example, being adrift for two days on a Philippino boat following its engine failure! A large number of often valuable undergraduate theses were one of the outputs of these expeditions reflecting John's vision and encouragement to involve students in his research.

Many of these students became co-authors of resulting publications in acknowledgement of their contributions.

John's sustained interest in tropical forest ecology took him on two further RGS expeditions to Maracá Island in Brazil in 1987–1988 and to Brunei in 1991–1992. He was awarded the Royal Geographical Society's Busk medal in 1991 for his contribution to tropical ecology as being 'the country's foremost tropical forest ecologist'. In 1992, he discovered his 'little place of paradise', at Barito Ulu in Kalimantan, a place he enjoyed immensely due to its remoteness and the variety of forest types found there. Here he continued work on plant-soil interrelations and especially on tropical heath forests and how their formation could be caused by extreme soil acidity (Proctor 1999). He worked closely with Suriantata, a local botanist, and supervised five Indonesian graduate students all of whom, at some point, worked at Barito Ulu. This helped to build the considerable reputation which John had in Indonesian forest ecology.

John attended all of the first four International Conferences on Serpentine Ecology and helped edit the proceedings from two of them. In addition, he edited a book on serpentine ecology, three more on tropical forest ecology [and co-authored a little known book entitled *Nature's Use of Colour in Plants and Their Flowers* (Proctor and Proctor 1978)]. He published over one hundred scientific papers including three in *Nature* (Proctor 1970; Proctor and McGowan 1976, Proctor et al. 1981). However, perhaps the most important legacy he left behind was the new generation of researchers he trained and who now teach and conduct research all over the world.

John had interests outside of academia, the most visible of which was his passion for vintage motorcycles and cars. Over the years he offered lifts to students in Bentleys, MGs and Jaguars; his final car being a 1961 Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud. He held them in high esteem and drove them only on sunny days and on dry roads. He was a life-long fan of Accrington Stanley football team, remaining loyal even when they were relegated from the league; he was thrilled when they regained their place shortly before he died. He will also be remembered for his interest in his students and his willingness to 'get his hands dirty' in



**Fig. 1** John Proctor in Palawan (The Philippines) in 1986 relaxing near the ultramafic Mount Bloomfield. (Photograph by L. A. Bruijnzeel)

the field as well as make helpful corrections to theses. He often held small, impromptu, social gatherings in the field as well as in his flat near Stirling at which all were made to feel welcome.

John retired from Stirling in early 2005 due to poor health and returned to his home county of Lancashire. He re-married (Dorothy Taylor) in the summer of 2006 shortly before his death later in the year.

We are confident that John's legacy will live on through his work, the good memories that we

have of him and through the worldwide group of 'Proctorites' who studied with him and under him (Fig. 1).

**Acknowledgements** We are grateful to George Argent, Sue Fogden, Robin Hanbury-Tenison and Rupert Ridgeway for additional thoughts and insights and Sumpurno Bruijnzeel for the unique photograph of John.

## References

- Hanbury-Tenison R (1984) Mulu: the rain forest. Widenfeld and Nicolson, London, UK, p 176
- Hoffman P, Baker AJM, Madulid DA, Proctor J (2003) *Phyllanthus balgooyi* (Euphorbiaceae s.l.), a new nickel-hyperaccumulating species from Palawan and Sabah. *Blumea* 48:193–199
- Proctor J (1970) Magnesium as a toxic element. *Nature* 227:742–743
- Proctor J (1979) A preliminary look at the language of Long Terawan. *Sarawak Mus J* 27(48):103–170
- Proctor J (ed) (1997) Scottish vegetation: plant ecology in Scotland. *Bot J Scotland* 49: 1–524
- Proctor J (1999) Heath forests and acid soils. *Bot J Scotland* 51:1–14
- Proctor J, McGowan ID (1976) Influence of magnesium on nickel toxicity. *Nature* 260:134
- Proctor J, Proctor S, (1978) Nature's use of colour in plants and their flowers. Peter Lowe, London, UK, p 116
- Proctor J, Woodell SRJ (1975) The ecology of serpentine soils. *Adv Ecol Res* 9:256–347
- Proctor J, Johnston WR, Cottam DA, Wilson AB (1981) Field-capacity water extracts from serpentine soils. *Nature* 294:245–246
- Proctor J, Anderson JM, Chai P, Vallack HW (1983a) Ecological studies in four contrasting lowland rain forests in Gunung Mulu National Park, Sarawak. I. Forest environment, structure and floristics. *J Ecol* 71:237–260
- Proctor J, Anderson JM, Fogden SCL, Vallack HW (1983b) Ecological studies in four contrasting lowland rain forests in Gunung Mulu National Park, Sarawak. II. Litterfall, litter standing crop and preliminary observations on herbivory. *J Ecol* 71:261–283