Richard Bovbjerg and The Iowa Lakeside Laboratory

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A Personal Introduction

In the spring of 1977, in Ames, a struggling biology major who had earlier shown some promise was ordered by his advisor: "Go to Lakeside Lab and take Dick Bovbjerg's Aquatic Ecology course." I did and it worked. I've parlayed that early potential into a career. And so many others I return to Lakeside, the first time to take another course, then to do my Master's research. More recently I come back to teach the Field Vertebrate Zoology course. Likwise, Dick has shifted from mentor to colleague, and we've co-authored a paper (Lanno and Bovbjerg, 1985). Now, I am truly honored to be the special editor of this issue commemorating Dick's 70th birthday and his retirement as the Director of the Iowa Lakeside Laboratory.

The Man

The statistics on Dick Bovbjerg read as follows: born in 1919 in Chicago; earned his BS in 1941, and his Ph.D in 1949 from the University of Chicago; from 1941-45 served in the Navy as the skipper of a minesweeper; arrived at The University of Iowa in 1955; became Director of the Iowa Lakeside Laboratory in 1963, and retired while still vigorous in 1989. He published over 50 papers on the behavioral ecology of crustaceans, molluscs, insects, and amphibians, including the classic: "Dominance order in the crayfish Orconectes virilis" (Bovbjerg, 1953). Dick's teaching has won him recognition as well. The University of Iowa Spectator article profiling him after he was honored as Distinguished Iowa Scientist by the Iowa Academy of Science was headlined: "He does everything in his power to show the splendor of science (Anon. 1982). Nationally, he served six terms on, and chaired, the College Testing Board's panel.

Two conversations I have had with others illustrate the force and scope of Dick's influence in both research and teaching. While I was in graduate school in Nova Scotia, another student popped up and said, "Bovbjerg! I know his paper on crayfish; we read it in our animal behavior seminar at North Carolina." Later, in Idaho I ran into a colleague of Dick's from the 1960s, who said: "His class was the only one I've ever seen where, at the end, the students gave him a standing ovation".

A Few Quotations.

Dick once described a zoology lab session and its impact on the students as follows: "We got freshly slaughtered cows' eyes. The students come in and they see a tray of cows' eyes and they are ready to vomit. They have never seen anything so gross in their lives. We cut into those things, and here is this object of "tray of cows' eyes and they are looking at it." Dick once described a zoology lab session and its impact on the students as follows: "We got freshly slaughtered cows' eyes. The students come in and they see a tray of cows' eyes and they are ready to vomit. They have never seen anything so gross in their lives. We cut into those things, and here is this object of..." (Anon. 1982)

As the Director of the Iowa Lakeside Laboratory.

It is at the Lakeside Lab that most of us included in this issue got to know Dick, and this may have been the best place for that. He appeared to prefer the solitude (no telephones in the labs and the faculty living quarters) and the comradry of the Lab to the squabbles, aggressiveness, and competition that have become a part of university zoology departments ("where ego supersedes" — my phrase, not his, but he'll love the word play). This has in part come about as departments have become more "reductionist", embracing the techniques of molecular biology at the expense of organismal biology.

Dick never felt a part of this modernization. He respects the new techniques and is in awe of their power. But at the same time he knows that natural selection acts on organisms, not DNA, and that to study an organism outside of its environment is to understand it only partially.

"Biotechnology is the buzzword of the discipline. This is the 'breakthrough' triumph of all biology, the arena of genes and enzymes and ultramicroscopic anatomy, the biology that holds hope for healing the ill and engineering genes for food production."

"But our environmental problems have not been solved and we need and will continue to need young people trained by scientists in the science of ecology, trained out in nature. This responsibility makes the field station program essential. At the Lakeside Lab, we study those things better learned there than within the confines of a lecture hall on campus." (Bovbjerg 1989).

Ecology is: "...not just a cell, not just a liver, not just an individual bunny, nor even all the bunyies on the hillside, but all the bunies and all the grass and all the fungi and all the bacteria and all the hawks — everything on the hillside . . . We're dealing with systems, not just critters, and this extends to the whole globe." (Anon. 1989).

During Dick's tenure as Director over 2000 students have attended Lakeside Lab and over 120 advanced degrees have been awarded for research done there. The King Lab and its annex were built, as was an aquatic ecology lab, and new faculty quarters; a beautiful library was converted from an old school house.

At least two themes run through Dick's years as Director. First, the quality of students has been maintained. If, over the years, this has meant fewer students, so be it. Class sizes have been limited to eight students per faculty member, in part to save the local habitats from being trampled but also to ensure that each student receives the individualized instruction necessary during the rigorous five week course. Secondly, Dick has managed to maintain Lakeside as an uncomplicated place, where students are allowed to focus on their studies and encouraged to talk with faculty. And where (sometimes despite themselves) students learn to enjoy the intellectual atmosphere of a quiet evening reading their text, or discussing biology on their porch while looking out over the lake.
The Lakeside Lab

The history of the Lakeside Lab has been detailed in recent articles (Bovbjerg 1989, Ziegłowsky 1985) and won't be repeated. Likewise, descriptions of The Lab are found in the yearly brochure and will not be included here; besides, the Lab is better experienced than described. A feeling for its character however can be gleaned from Dick's words:

"Students take only one course that meets all day, every day. This saturation learning is seldom possible on the large campus. As the field station, classes are small and professors work individually with students. The professor's research and teaching intertwine, and investigation is a part of each course — doing science rather than just hearing about science" (Swaller 1989).

And further: "...it's hard to bring the lake into the classroom. We have a clear specialization: study of the sort of biology that cannot be done at the university." "We will soon be needing more and more young scientists who understand the workings of the larger systems and who will help heal wounds we have inflicted on our environment. (Swaller 1989).

In 1910, Thomas Macbride, the founder of the Lakeside Laboratory stated the lab's mission as follows: "Dry dead fungi are dusty labelled things, as meaningless as the stuffed skin of mammal or bird, or a fossil in a box; better than no exhibit at all, to be sure, but poor indeed as from the stony pages of the riven quarry stone. The lakeside laboratory shall afford to all interested, for once at the chance to see the real world, nature alive, accomplishing her miracles in their own silent splendor, often needing words: [Dick's] professor's advice. Ann and Viktor Bovbjerg, Debby Ziegłowsky Baker, Dick Baker, Ken Lang, Bob Cruden, Roger and Marilyn Bachmann, Neil Bernstein, and Kelly Douglas read earlier versions of this manuscript and kindly gave me advice and perspective. Ann Bovbjerg tracked down the photograph.

A Final Note

Organizing this project has been especially rewarding because it has revolved around the three people who influenced me most as a graduate student: Dick Bovbjerg — my first mentor; Marilyn Bachmann — my Master's advisor, co-author of my first paper on cannibal morph salamanders, and co-editor of the JIAS; and Richard Wassersug — my Ph. D advisor, whose ideas about amphibian predator satiation I've tapped for insights into the cannibal morph phenomenon. Without Dick Bovbjerg's influence it wouldn't have happened this way. (He tells the story about discovering me as a grill cook in a Hardee's restaurant and draws a parallel with the discovery of Marilyn Monroe as a waitress in a malt shop.) In fact without that timely Lakeside Lab aquatic ecology course it might not have happened at all.

REFERENCES

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