

Professor Peter Jewell

1925–1998



Today it is sometimes forgotten how recently ecology and animal behaviour have emerged as respectable sciences from being merely glorified nature study. I can remember hearing, only half a century ago, a distinguished professor stating firmly at a meeting of the Society for Experimental Biology, I think it was, that 'In Cambridge we do not teach ecology!' The transition that has taken place in attitudes since those days owes much to people like Peter Jewell. With a background in agriculture and physiology, his decision in the early 1960s to take his skills out into the field, to attempt the elucidation of some of the many problems facing real animals in the real world, was an important shift of emphasis. He brought a grasp of physiological function, and concepts of experimental rigour learned in the laboratory, to subjects that had sometimes lacked these important values. The researches which followed, often carried out in collaboration with the many colleagues and students who were attracted by his philosophy and personality, were part of the growing stream of vigorous new ideas that have shaped present-day attitudes towards ecology and ecological research.

In the early days of animal population dynamics, entomologists in particular were very scornful of attempts to study mammals, on the grounds that it was impossible to collect the vast numbers of individuals that were then deemed necessary for statistical analysis. Peter was not deterred, and by imaginative use of marking techniques showed that useful results could be

obtained both with small (mice and voles on Skomer) and large (Soay sheep on St Kilda) species. Longevity is also a problem with larger mammals. By extending his investigations into the reproduction, behaviour and population dynamics of Soay sheep over some 30 years, scrambling over the steep slopes of Hirta at an age when lesser men opt for pipe and slippers, he gathered an unequalled body of data about this remarkable feral ungulate.

The Soay study was not his only long-term project. He carried out much work on animal remains in archaeology, some in collaboration with his wife Juliet Clutton-Brock, and was the prime mover in the creation of the experimental earthwork on Overton Down, Wiltshire. This project is expected to continue well into the third millennium, and was designed to elucidate the long-term processes of change in earthworks in order to give precision to archaeological interpretation. Peter was particularly proud of this application of experimental methods to archaeology, considering it his greatest achievement. Be that as it may, it is a perfect example of the kind of lateral thinking which made him the outstanding scientist that he was.

Conservation of rare species was an important strand in Peter's work on Soay sheep, and he was deeply concerned about the dangers posed by modern farming methods and reckless exploitation of natural resources to many remarkable and beautiful animals. This concern found expression in his strong advocacy of

practical measures, such as the formation of the Rare Breeds Survival Trust, and in the time and effort which he devoted to the work of committees advising on animal breeding policies at the Zoological Society of London.

In Africa, too, alongside his more academic researches, he saw clearly the mounting problems to wildlife posed by expanding human populations, and took a lead in proposing practical management measures. Life in Africa also had its difficulties. During the Biafran war in 1966 he suffered considerable loss, and it says much for his sense of humour that in later years he was able to raise a wry smile when recollecting the astonishing inadequacies of the British Diplomatic Corps.

Peter Jewell's academic career was very distinguished. After completing his PhD at Cambridge he lectured at the Royal Veterinary College before moving to a Research Fellowship at the Zoological Society of London. A brief spell at the University of Nigeria was followed by a teaching post at University College, London, then the Chair of Zoology at Royal Holloway College, and

finally the Professorship of the Physiology of Reproduction in the University of Cambridge, and a Fellowship of St John's College. His curriculum vitae lists over 100 publications and a huge range of services to learned societies and other organizations, national and international.

But what of the man? Above all he was tremendous fun. His interests were so wide that he could chat interestingly and amusingly on just about any topic under the sun. He dressed in a manner which was mildly eccentric but always elegant. He enjoyed all the good things in life with a gusto that never faded. He loved ceramics, and I was delighted to be able to commission a jar to join the ranks from the contents of which, so he told me, he composed a breakfast cereal each morning to suit his mood and appetite. He loved art, and his personal notepaper, headed by an erotic drawing in the manner of Aubrey Beardsley, was a gem. His friends miss him greatly, and his wife and three daughters must miss him even more.

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