

PERSPECTIVE

Richard Maitland Laws (1926–2014), CBE, FRS, ScD

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Dick Laws was born in Whitley Bay, Northumberland, on 23 April 1926 and died in Cambridge, on 7 October 2014.

He was educated at Dame Allan's School at first in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and then in Windermere whence the school was evacuated during the Second World War. Here in the Lake District, as an avid Boy Scout, he developed a lust for the independent life of the outdoors, which he started to illustrate in ink and later in watercolour. At school, he captained the school's rugby team and excelled in biology, winning a scholarship to Cambridge.

He came to St. Catharine's College, Cambridge, in 1944 to read Natural Sciences and developed an interest in polar research, inspired by local polar luminaries such as Colin Bertram, Lancelot Fleming and Brian Roberts, and graduated in 1947.

After graduation, Dick secured a job as biologist with the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey (FIDS) and went south on an expedition under the leadership of his mentor-to-be, Vivian Fuchs, who landed him as the base leader on Signy Island in the South Orkneys for two years (1948–49) under austere conditions. There he studied the biology of the southern elephant seal, building his own laboratory from the remains of a derelict Norwegian whaling station. While there, Dick pioneered a method for age determination in seals based on annual layers in teeth, which revolutionized studies of the population dynamics of mammals, and a still-used method for marking seals based on flipper tags. His work was published (in 1952) after his return to Cambridge in 1949 as a research student to write up his PhD thesis. However, at the end of the year he went back south again, this time to the old Norwegian whaling station that was still operating at Grytviken in South Georgia. En route he stopped at the Falklands to carry out a fur seal survey all around the islands. At South Georgia, he also censused seals all over the island and collected materials from elephant seals throughout 1951–52, constructing a population model for the species without the aid of computers or even a calculating machine. This formed the basis for a comprehensive management plan for the elephant seals on the island. Implemented by the Falkland Islands



Photo courtesy of Maureen Laws.

Government in 1952, the plan was in operation with very positive results until the demise of the whaling and sealing industry in 1964.

Before defending his thesis on the reproduction of the southern elephant seal at Cambridge in 1953, he took the opportunity to go on a "leisure" trip, this time to the Arctic, for the Fisheries Laboratory at Lowestoft studying experimental fishing off Greenland, Bjørnøya (Bear Island), Jan Mayen and Iceland. Dick was awarded his PhD in the autumn of 1953. At the same time, he landed his first "real" job with the National Institute of Oceanography (NIO), charged with the study of the great whales. He soon went south again, on the Norwegian-crewed whaling factory ship *FF Balaena*, as biologist and whaling inspector for a seven-month trip (1953–54), spending an unbroken four months at sea. For Dick this was an epic journey, catching 30-m, 150-tonne blue whales, at times facing mountainous seas (estimated at up to 25 m) threatening to overturn the small "catcher" vessel *Setter 9* while he was temporarily onboard. He even witnessed the decapitation of a man when the whale cannon accidentally went off.

Dick continued his work on large whales at the NIO as Principal Scientific Officer over the next seven years until 1961. Here he was strongly involved in developing a hallmark method for aging large whales based on annual layering in their ear wax plugs, partly working at the whale station at Steinshamn on the west coast of Norway. However, he was for once outmanoeuvred by local infighting and did not become an author of the paper when it was published. During his tenure at NIO, he did manage to publish his elephant seal material from Signy Island and South Georgia in several monographs, and he was for the first time introduced to the

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bureaucracies of international meetings of agencies such as the International Whaling Commission, later to become a large part of his life.

In 1954, Dick married Maureen Holmes. Unhappy with the work at NIO, he agreed to direct a hippopotamus management and research programme in the vast Queen Elizabeth National Park in Uganda. In 1961, he established himself with his wife and two young sons in a palm-log cabin with a thatched roof of papyrus reeds, where lions snored on the lawn during the night and elephants had to be chased out of the vegetable patch in the morning. There were some 15 000 hippos in the park whose overgrazing was causing severe erosion. Dick undertook population counts and oversaw the culling of some 1000 hippos annually over five years. He won acceptance for a similar approach in the Murchison Falls National Park, where some 10 000 elephants were overpopulating and destroying their food supplies. Here, in cooperation with the game warden, Ian Parker, he culled a staggering 2000 elephants while studying their ecology, which was published as the classic book *Elephants and their habitats* (Laws et al. 1975). The local African population utilized all the meat and the ivory was sold to finance the project.

Dick moved in 1967 to Tsavo National Park in Kenya, where he directed an elephant management programme and started out with a cull of 900 elephants. In spite of the success of the initial phase of the project, opposition and intrigue grew. When Dick himself was accused of corruption, he resigned in anger, returning to the UK in 1968. Tragically, Dick was soon proved right when an estimated 7000 elephants starved to death in the park during a severe drought in 1970–71.

Upon his return to England, he soon landed a job as head of the Life Sciences Division of his first employer, the FIDS, which in the meantime had become the British Antarctic Survey (BAS), now under the leadership of his old mentor, recently knighted, Sir Vivian Fuchs. At the time of Dick's return, BAS was a collection of isolated units spread over the country and the research compartmentalized. He immediately took it upon himself to restructure first the Biology Section and subsequently, as director from 1973, the whole organization. When he retired as director in 1987, BAS was consolidated in a new building in Cambridge as a well-organized world-leading organization for polar research, with 400 staff, two major research ships, several aircraft and five Antarctic bases. In his capacity as director much of Dick's time was spent in international scientific meetings, like the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research, for which he became president (1990–94), and wrangling with

the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) over finance. In fact, when Argentina invaded the Falklands in 1982 the very existence of BAS was under threat. The war, however, made Dick a valued advisor to Margaret Thatcher, who in return became a staunch supporter of BAS and secured its funding. Dick's astute conduct during the crisis won him a CBE in 1983, but debacles with NERC in this period probably cost him a knighthood.

In spite of the burdens of administration, Dick still managed to get out of the office and made almost annual trips to Antarctica inspecting the numerous bases, overseeing research and even carrying out seal research for himself. He edited several learned books on seals and Antarctic ecology and wrote numerous scientific papers and the book *Antarctica—the last frontier* (Laws 1989).

Upon his retirement from BAS in 1987, Dick was elected Master of St. Edmund's House in Cambridge. This was at the time a rather laid-back graduate college with a strong Roman Catholic tradition, so the election of a declared agnostic as master was bound to cause tensions. Dick persevered through intrigue and underhanded college politics, and the institution gained full collegiate status and the name was changed to St. Edmund's College. When he retired in 1996, the infrastructure had been greatly improved and the number of students had grown fivefold.

He received the Polar Medal in 1976 (with a second clasp in 2001), was elected to a Fellowship of the Royal Society in 1980 and was awarded a Cambridge ScD in 1995. After his retirement, he became an Honorary Fellow of St. Edmund's, a status he had already received from St. Catharine's in 1982, additional to an Hon. ScD from the University of Bath (1991) and a Foreign Fellowship of the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters in 1998. A glacier is named after him on Coronation Island in the South Orkney Islands.

A professional with the highest standards and expectations, Dick was formidable as an ally and as an adversary, while in private he was a modest and warm friend who had the rare gift of being able to rejoice in the success of others.

Over a thousand pages of Dick's uncompleted autobiography, drafted during his retirement, are available at www.spri.cam.ac.uk/resources/autobiographies/richardlaws.

References

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