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Obituary
Donald William Thomas (1953-2009)

Donald W. Thomas died on May 30th 2009 at the age of 55, on his field site in Corsica – “l’Île de Beauté” – where he was to do research on eco-physiology of blue tits. His sudden death was an immense shock to his friends and colleagues. He leaves behind his beloved partner Marie-Hélène Poulin and sons Alexis and Patrick.

We will try to tell Don’s academic story, highlight the quality and diversity of his contributions to eco-physiology, and describe his personality both as a young scientist (Brock’s point of view) as well as an accomplished researcher and experienced supervisor (Vincent’s point of view).

Don completed high school at Lower Canada College and received an Honours B.Sc. from the University of New Brunswick (Fredericton) in 1975. He completed a M.Sc. in animal ecology at Carleton University in 1978, and a Ph.D. in tropical ecology at University of Aberdeen in 1982. He did postdoctoral work at Carleton University in 1982-84. Don also worked for a year as a research associate in forestry and wildlife management at the University of Washington. These diverse research experiences gave Don a broad vision of ecology and allowed him to put his research into perspective, a great quality that facilitated his success throughout his career.

In 1985, Don obtained a University Research Fellowship from the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada University, which he held in the Département de biologie at Université de Sherbrooke. He took only 8 years to reach the title of full professor, obtaining as a young researcher a status usually awarded around mid-career. Don became Dean of Sciences at the Université de Sherbrooke in 2005. At the time of his death, he had just been appointed to an additional term as Dean.

Don wrote over 20 book chapters and more than 100 scientific papers which appeared in a variety of journals including Nature, Science, Ecology, Journal of Animal Ecology, Oecologia, Oikos, Functional Ecology, Physiological and Biochemical Zoology, and Journal of Comparative Physiology. Don also served as Co-Editor-in-chief of Ecoscience from 2004-2008. During 24 years at Université de Sherbrooke, Don supervised 2 postdoctoral fellows, 9 Ph.D. and 13 M.Sc. students. Many are now occupying academic research positions. His scientific legacy will continue to expand, as he had – and will continue to have – a major influence on the way we think about science.

Don was a question-driven scientist and an exceptional empiricist. He rightly thought that the marriage between the precision that can be obtained in lab-based measures and the reality of field-based studies allows better understanding of the strategies that animals use to resolve energetic challenges. The record of Don’s publications demonstrates that that he worked on many species, mainly mammals (multiple bat species, eastern chipmunks, voles, and porcupines) and birds (blue tits, juncos, swallows, and broad-winged hawks), but also on crabs and turtles. He undertook research projects and collaborations all over the world, in Canada, United States, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Great Britain, France, French Polynesia, Cook Islands, Australia, Côte d’Ivoire, and Zimbabwe.

Don’s research interests were eclectic. His main interests were torpor and hibernation, digestive function and nutrient requirements, and energetics of breeding and overwintering. Don also published papers on eco-physiology of personality, raptor migration, heat flux (in bovid horns and under helium-oxygen atmospheres), body condition, temperature regulation, and on bat behavioural ecology, life-history, and natural history. There is no doubt that what allowed Don’s to efficiently tackle many different scientific subjects were his great blend of mental and manual abilities. In other words, Don was a quick-minded, very curious, and alert handyman. The essence of his scientific contribution holds to his ability to address all sorts of questions using a variety of technically challenging methods.
Don was proactive. He was a proud and imposing man, whose presence in a room was never unnoticed. He was very talkative, particularly skilled at expressing himself with clarity. These characteristics made him an imposing colleague. He was always quick to use evidence to support his arguments, and one was unlikely to win an argument with him unless he had better evidence. He liked to argue and we liked to argue with him. His honesty and direct criticism – though potentially shocking for the least confident ones – was very efficient in making scientific discussions productive. He was renowned for asking remarkably pertinent questions during departmental seminars and Ph.D. defences, even on subjects that were very far from his domain of expertise.

Don was also a great teacher. He received teaching awards from the Faculté des Sciences of Université de Sherbrooke during four consecutive years (1994-1998). His energetic style of teaching kept the sleepiest of us awake and his passion for animal eco-physiology drew a lot of young scientists to this field. He also received in 1999 the national Roy C. Hill award from the Canadian Teachers Federation for the production of a scientific manual for young pre-scholar scientists (Les Mains à la science : éveil de l’esprit scientifique), co-authored with Marie-Hélène.

Don was famous for his strong English accent when speaking French. It seemed that throughout his whole career in a francophone university he never worked on improving pronunciation. With Don the content mattered more than the form. Even if we all joked about his accent (him too), it was impressive to listen to Don lecturing in French, as he expressed himself very clearly. His accent was definitively part of his charm – we will continue to imitate his intonations when quoting him for his numerous down to earth lines.

I (Brock) first met Don in 1976 when he joined my laboratory at Carleton University as an M.Sc. student. Although it was common knowledge that little brown bats (Myotis lucifugus) mated in the fall, usually in underground sites where they would later hibernate, nobody had looked closely at the details — until Don took this on as a topic for his M.Sc. thesis. Don’s work opened our eyes to some of the details of what was happening. But in true form, Don also worked with others in the lab to expand the scope of the overall work. Whether the setting was a mine in southeastern Ontario, the Zimbabwe bush, or a panel discussion in Montreal, Don’s enthusiasm and love of life was entirely obvious. But there was more to Don that bonhomie. No doubt it was his combination of talents that made Don a success – as a colleague or an administrator.

I (Vincent) first met Don during an undergrad field course. He was showing us how to use telemetry instruments, saying that if we were able to find all the hidden transmitters rapidly, some time would remain for a beer “à la plage”. However, being Don’s student was not for all: one had to gain his confidence by being autonomous, efficient, and able to receive his direct criticism. Upon having Don in your corner, he was definitively “the best” advisor because he provided his students with the means they needed to reach their full potential and always pushed them to further develop their autonomy to survive as independent researchers. After important academic events, such as pre-doctoral exams and Ph.D. defences, he regularly invited his students, families, and members of the committee at his house for a warm-hearted Mediterranean dinner prepared by Marie-Hélène.

Most important of all, besides being a true leader, Professor Donald William Thomas was one of the most enthusiastic and passionate individuals we have known. Everyone who had the unique privilege of knowing Don personally and working with him knows that. We could not afford to lose Don – as a friend, as a colleague, as a dean, as a mentor. His scientific legacy will continue to have a profound impact in the field of eco-physiology.

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