
Obituary

Donald Dalglish McGregor

October 15, 1938 – September 17, 2020

Willie Smith

Honorary Associate Professor, School of Environment, The University of Auckland

On his retirement in 1997, Don McGregor stepped down both as a Professor of Zoology at the University of Otago, and as Chief Scientist in the Ministry of Research, Science and Technology in Wellington. In both roles he contributed a powerful intellect, scientific expertise, and strong leadership skills. These were firmly grounded in a happy family life and a deep Christian faith, expressed in commitment to his church and to the wider community.

Don's own, earliest memory was of standing in his cot, shaking its bars. Throughout his career Don continued, gently, but with purpose, to 'shake the bars' whether as a researcher, as an academic to help his students realise their full potential, or as Chief Scientist, to strengthen the science research system, extend its global links, and increase the evidential role of scientific research in public policy. This he did almost diffidently, always modestly, but to effect.

After having completed an MSc with 1st Class Honours at the University of Canterbury, Don arrived in Dunedin in 1962 to work as a Research Officer in the Wellcome Medical Research Institute at the University of Otago. He obtained his PhD in 1969. His early work focused on the vascular system and the alleviation of hypertension producing at least one classic paper (McGregor and Smirk, 1970, Watts,

2008). He also had a keen interest in mosquitoes, in particular *Opifex fuscus* (Naeroa) endemic around the New Zealand coast (McGregor, 1965).

In 1968 he had accepted a lecturing position in the Department of Zoology at Otago. In that role he maintained strong research links with former colleagues in the medical school and encouraged his research students to seek their help and advice. Don is acknowledged as a wonderful research mentor and a motivating teacher. He was approachable and extremely generous with his time, traits also greatly appreciated during his term as Head of the Department of Zoology (1980-1985) and as Dean of the Faculty of Science (1986-1988).

In 1991, Don, by then an Assistant Vice-Chancellor at Otago leading the newly created Division of Sciences, was invited to chair a Review Panel reporting to the Hon Simon Upton, Minister of Science and Technology, concerning science research funding from the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology (FoRST). The following year he was invited to become Chief Scientist at MoRST (Ministry of Research, Science and Technology).

To his new role, Don brought a high level of scientific experience and a significant research reputation, as well as



Don McGregor (left, supplied) and (right) at Scott Base 1992 (Photo by Nicola Holmes ©Antarctica New Zealand Pictorial Collection, <https://adam.antarcticanz.govt.nz/nodes/view/24472#idx93496>)

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wide-ranging administrative and leadership skills. This improved MoRST's mana in the science community and supported Don's role in shaping policies both for science and for the use of science in public policy.

Don played a key role at the intersection of the science and policy worlds. MoRST was at that time very much driven by priority-setting to guide the allocation of research funds including priority statements released in 1992 and 1995. These were well-regarded at the time and Don was part of this monumental task.

Don's other activities were wide-ranging. His earlier research interest in biosecurity, when it was still in its infancy, was extended with his leadership in setting-up and managing the Expert Science Panels established to inform government policies on Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy, the incursion and eradication of Tussock Moth as well as possum-spreading of bovine Tuberculosis (Atkinson and Wright, 1993). This also contributed to strengthening a government commitment to evidence-based policy (MoRST, 1995).

As Chief Scientist, Don engaged across the New Zealand science community as well as providing science advice within the Ministry. He also sought to strengthen New Zealand's international science links, especially to places with which New Zealand had little previous contact but anticipated and wished to build stronger ties - the Pacific Island nations, South Africa, and Latin America. He travelled to New Zealand's Antarctic Scott Base in 1992. McGregor retired from MoRST in 1997.

Don McGregor was born and raised in Christchurch to Roy and Elsie (née Hall), enjoying holidays at the family bach in Diamond Harbour. He recalled his own school days with memories of saluting the flag and renditions of the national anthem. These early experiences maintained in him an enduring fondness for the South Island. He married Marjorie (née Mauger) in Timaru on Easter Monday, 1966. They had four children of whom he remained enormously proud.

Don McGregor's droll humour, diffident manner and generosity with his time made him an easy colleague and respected boss. He was a 'thoroughly decent bloke' who could be relied on for good advice. He was not interested in public service politics, nor office politics. His fundamental integrity, together with his professional ability and skills, earn him lasting affection and respect.

References

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