

Notes about Walter Westman

**Assembled by Tom Webb,
his Swarthmore Classmate**



Walt died of complications due to AIDS January 2, 1991. The 25th reunion yearbook for Walt's Swarthmore class published in 1991 contained memorial notes about him. Since that time, I have joined with Susan Beatty, one of his former students, and Bob Peet, a colleague and friend, to publish a short summary of his contributions in ecology, environmental policy, and LGBT issues (see IAVS NEWS below). A group of us also held a session in Walt's honor at the American Association of Geographers Meeting in San Diego in April, 1992 and then gathered for a brief memorial service in the California sun and ocean air.

Walt's memory is being carried forward in a number of ways. For the past decade, International House at the University of Sydney, where Walt resided when obtaining his M.Sc. at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, has sponsored the annual Walter Westman Lecture on Science, Humanity and the Environment. The National Organization for Gay and Lesbian Scientists and Technical Professionals (NOGLSTP) offers the Walt Westman Award to those members who have "shown dedication and commitment to the advancement of NOGLSTP's mission". Walt helped found this organization at a time when homophobia was still a major problem in the workplace. [A page at NOGLSTP's website](#) is devoted to Walt and contains the remarks of some of the award winners. I provide a long quote from Rochelle Diamond, the first award winner in 2004, about Walt and their work together for NOGLSTP. Her remarks are not to be missed and follow the IAVS NEWS article (see below). Walt shines as an effective mover and shaker who got LGBT issues discussed at meetings of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS).

Recently (June 26, 2016), I received an email from Philippe Baveye, an engineering soil expert whose joint-authored [2016 review article](#) in *Frontiers of Environmental Science* cites Walt's groundbreaking 1977 article about ecosystem services. He writes the following: "The appended article is a 'rock the boat' review article on the ecosystem services of soils. As in previous articles that I have published on the topic, we cite and discuss (on page 6, in particular) Walter Westman's seminal 1977 article on assigning prices to nature's services. I notice that, thanks in part to our efforts, more and more people are aware of this article, which I think is a fundamental piece of literature. It is definitely helping us to include a non-monetary voice in the debate on the relationship between the economy and nature. In fact, there is so much interest in this article at the moment, that I think it might be a good idea, in 2017, to publish an article entitled something like '40 years after Westman...', giving some information on how this article came about (including influence on Westman during his stay in Australia), which I am sure the journal *Ecological Economics* would be keen on publishing."

On another front, Walt has emerged as a named character in a novel entitled *Ecologists: A Novel* by William Dritschilo, an ecologist who like Walt got his PhD from Cornell. Bill's novel has fictional people interacting with a number of known ecologists including Walt when he was excited about Barry Commoner's run for president. The book also includes some slightly rewritten conversations that I had with Walt, but in the book they are between Walt and a fictional character. I checked this sharing out with Walt's older brother Robert, and we agreed that this was one way for Walt to live on. Walt's presence in the book allows some issues about gay people in the profession to be portrayed.



IAVS NEWS

Walter Emil Westman 1945-1991



Walt Westman was a prolific contributor over the past 20 years to the fields of ecology, geography, and environmental policy. He fused training in plant ecology with an interest in human modification of the landscape to become an outstanding ecologist and geographer whose work ultimately reshaped modern biogeographic research. He influenced hundreds of undergraduate students in their pursuit of a scientific career, inspired dozens of graduate students, and was a mentor to many young professionals. On January 2, 1991 in San Francisco, Walt Westman died at the age of 45, from complications associated with AIDS. Both the scientific community and the myriad of people Walt influenced suffer this untimely loss.

Walt was born November 5, 1945 in New York City. In 1966 he obtained his B.A. in botany from Swarthmore College, and in 1969 his M.Sc. from Macquarie University, Australia. At Macquarie, Walt worked with D. J. Anderson on density and basal area sampling techniques for contagiously distributed trees, which initiated his interest in quantitative approaches to ecology. Two years later in 1971 Walt completed a Ph.D. in Ecology at Cornell University where he was R.H. Whittaker's first doctoral student. Walt's appreciation of Whittaker was expressed in the review of his life and contributions, written with R. K. Peet and published in *Vegetatio* 48, 1982. It was at Cornell that Walt developed a research focus on vegetation pattern and diversity that he would follow for many years to come. His dissertation work on the pygmy forest of northwestern California became a classic study on edaphic control of community structure and function. It also contained an early critique of factor analysis and principal components analysis as analytical tools in

ecology, perhaps stimulating future development of more appropriate methods.

After completing the Ph.D., Walt spent a year in Washington, D.C. as a Scholar in Ecology through the American Political Science Association Congressional Fellowship Program. He advised Senator Muskie and the Senate Subcommittee on Air and Water Pollution, and helped draft the Water Pollution Control Act of 1972. Walt then returned to Australia (1972-1974) to take a position as Lecturer in Ecology at the University of Queensland, Brisbane. There he pursued his interests in the structure, diversity and productivity of *Eucalyptus* forests, and also began research in water pollution control.

Walt returned to the U.S. to take a position at U.C.L.A., first in Environmental Planning and Management in the School of Architecture and Urban Planning (1975-76), and finally in the Department of Geography (1976-1984 Assistant to Full Professor) where he developed an international reputation for his work on Californian coastal sage scrub vegetation. Walt's research improved understanding of the biogeography (evolution, distribution, island biogeography), ecology (diversity, succession, structure, resistance and resilience) and response to environmental stress and disturbance (air pollution, fire, climate change) of this community. The studies were unique in their consideration of the dynamics of coastal sage vegetation over its entire geographic range. His use of gradient analysis, modeling, and experimental testing of hypotheses, encouraged others in biogeography to do the same and to interact more fully with cognate disciplines such as ecology. Walt's participation in policy and environmental impact research demonstrated ways to bring together the human and physical science areas of inquiry within geography. Walt integrated his several fields of expertise in a well-received 1985 book 'Ecology, Impact Assessment, and Environmental Planning', in which he brought theoretical ecological principles to bear on environmental impact assessment and policy development.

In 1984 Walt made the difficult decision to leave the academic setting and move to San Francisco where he could more effectively use his talents to improve awareness of gay rights, while at the same time pursue his interests in applied ecology. The position Walt took as a Research Scientist in the Office of Ecosystem Science and Technology at NASA/Ames Research Center, brought him into the area of remote sensing technology. He immediately began applying these techniques to the



plant communities. In 1987 Walt moved to the position of Staff Scientist in Global Energy-Environmental Issues at Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory, where he was also a Research Affiliate in the Energy and Resources Group of the University of California, Berkeley. In these positions Walt worked on numerous projects including remote sensing detection of vegetation stress and tropical deforestation, rare plant conservation, species endangerment, and ecological restoration. The culmination of Walt's extensive work in environmental policy area was his most recent publication, "Managing for biodiversity: unresolved science and policy questions" (BioScience 1990). His latest contributions on global monitoring and modeling of the effects of climate change on vegetation will be published posthumously. These final works provide a model upon which future developments in global monitoring of change likely will be based.

Often we only know a person as a scientist, but Walt's dedication to social, ethical and environmental issues deserves special recognition. Walt served in an advisory capacity to numerous governmental agencies, including a U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Environmental Pollution (1975-76), the Council on Environmental Quality Global 2000 Study (1977-78), the Commission on Ecology of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (member 1979-1991), the Ecosystem Effects Working Group of the EPA National Acid Deposition Assessment Program (chair, 1985), and most recently the Unmanaged Lands report for the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (chair, 1989-1991).

Walt was very supportive of the idea to launch the *Journal of Vegetation Science* and he started reviewing

for the journal almost immediately. He was active in the Ecological Society of America (Public Affairs Committee 1983-84, Professional Ethics Committee 1988-1991) and the Association of American Geographers (Energy and Environment Specialty Group Board Member, 1989-1991). He was a founding member of the National Organization for Gay and Lesbian Scientists and Technical Professionals, was a participant in the Gay and Lesbian History Workshop in San Francisco, and an active supporter of Project Inform (an advice and advocacy group for persons with AIDS).

Walt Westman's contributions to many fields of research was impressive, yet the contribution that he made to the development of the careers of students and colleagues was equally impressive. Because he was an exciting and inspiring teacher, a dedicated and concerned advisor, a stimulating and caring colleague, and friend to many, he will be remembered as much for his effect on professional lives as his scientific advancements. Walt's influence will be felt for a long time to come, and he will be sorely missed.

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Rochelle Diamond, the first recipient of the Walt Westman Award from NOGLSTP in 2004, wrote the following about Walt and his work for NOGLSTP:

"I am deeply honored and humbled to receive this the first NOGLSTP Walt Westman Award. Honored because you thought enough of my work on behalf of NOGLSTP to reward me with the highest honor given to a NOGLSTP member. Humbled to receive the first such award.

"The award is named for Walt Westman, one of the founders of this organization, not because he put the infrastructure together, but because he spoke out, wrote letters. He organized some of the first occasions here at AAAS meetings so that gay and lesbian scientists could find each other, talk about mutual interests, and more importantly discuss issues that needed to be addressed.

"Walt was a true visionary scientist—a leading edge kind of guy. Geographer by discipline, ecologist by research, he was one of the first to use satellite remote sensing technology to describe the changing conditions of biomes and biomass with incidents such as fire, draught, air pollution, and the human encroachment on our planet. Just a cursory search on the Web of Science yields over 60 papers issued in his shortened life.

"Yet, Walt Westman was a fellow who was willing to take risks, to raise his voice to make a difference for his community. As a geographer, he knew how to use knowledge and intelligence to make convincing arguments. Whether he was working at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, UCLA, UC Berkeley Lawrence Laboratory, or NASA Ames, Walt was proudly out and 'raising Cain'. He was an activist on homophobia, employment issues for gays and lesbians, and later AIDS issues.

"I had the enlightening experience to work with Walt to organize the first, then NOGLS, symposium that we presented at an AAAS annual meeting in Los Angeles on the impact of homophobia on AIDS research. It was quite an education for me to watch as Walt raised money from UCLA and other sources to fund such an enterprise. He brought various experts from diverse disciplines to debate the ethics and issues of the research being conducted at the time. I learned the power of putting ethicists and scientists in the same room together. I didn't always agree with Walt, but he sure knew how to get things stirred up and running. He died of AIDS several years later.

"Walt convinced me that to change things we had to work on the professional level, to preserve our integrity and our right to question. The rationality of the scientific approach is the better way to educate and uplift our society about the concerns voiced by the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities. And that is what I have tried to implement on behalf of NOGLSTP.

*"Together, we have organized a fairly stable infrastructure. Through networking, newsletters, and the internet we have gathered our constituency, found our voice, and search for legitimacy. We found that by aligning ourselves with the AAAS. It was a long but useful process to affiliate with AAAS. It forced us to create by-laws, incorporate in the state of California, seek 501(c) 3 status as an educational organization, and answer some really tough questions. What did NOGLSTP stand for? How do we view our interactions with AAAS? Do we stand for the same values and goals as AAAS? These are still really good questions as our strategic plan reflects. And if you are interested you can find it on our website:
<http://www.noglstp.org>."*

Note from Robert Westman, Walt's older brother, June 1, 2015:

Thank you so much for this memorial to Walt and for bringing others who knew him up to date. Your reference to Swarthmore brings back one of my own very distant memories: On holidays, I sometimes hitchhiked from Ann Arbor back to New Rochelle. On one of those occasions, I managed to get myself to Swarthmore, although with some difficulty because my last ride (a traveling salesman in a Studebaker!) dropped me off on the Pennsylvania Turnpike. I think it was the Valley Forge exit. I got another ride into Valley Forge and then took a bus. Of course, no cell phones in those days—really, no nothing (like suitcases with wheels). I had wanted to surprise Walt. Ultimately, as night fell, I had to call him to let him know that I was close by and would be arriving soon. That meant finding a call booth, which was not easy. Finally, I got there and we were both excited to see one another. It must have been my first trip to the campus. He showed me his dorm and we walked around. I thought it was a beautiful campus. He seemed happy at Swarthmore but sweating his German course (in which he did not do well). I don't recall much else. It must have been in his Freshman year—hence, 1962-63.

The above compilation of accounts about Walter Westman was first published on a password protected website for the Swarthmore College Class of 1966. The website was created in 2016 for the celebration of their 50th Reunion.

—Tom Webb