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AWA Blossomed under Botanist's Careful Guidance

By Andy Marshall

A centrepiece of Richard Pharis's prolific and ground-breaking career as a botanist has been his work with potent plant hormones called gibberellins. Pharis's work has promoted a better understanding of their ability to induce flowering and other growth in higher plants ranging from conifers to vines.

A stickler for accuracy, Dick, as he's commonly called, demurs at the layman interviewer's suggestion that he helps make flowers bloom better and plants grow more profusely. In his characteristically meticulous and serious tone, he offers instead a more complete scientific explanation of this life-long preoccupation.

But it provides a neat metaphor that can be well applied to the almost four decades he's dedicated to the Canadian conservation movement and in particular to the Alberta Wilderness Association, fostering their flowering and development in a way that will ensure their health for years to come.

In an interview from his home north of Cochrane, near Calgary, Dick agrees that botanical research and his efforts on behalf of conservationism are complementary. Guarded, perhaps even austere, he chooses his words carefully, although occasional flashes of dry humour lighten the conversation.

In recognition of his leadership role in the formation of the AWA in 1968, two subsequent terms as president, plus many years guiding the organization as an effective and influential advocate for the preservation of significant natural areas, the 68-year-old University of Calgary professor emeritus will receive an AWA Defenders Award on Nov. 18.

Soon after, he and his wife, Vivian, another long-time AWA stalwart, will leave for New Zealand, where he will resume several research projects as a visiting professor at the University of Canterbury and where they will both spend up to four months in Waipara, about 60 kilometres north of Christchurch, on a vineyard they jointly own with other partners. "I'm learning viticulture relatively late in life," he says, noting that their product, Torlesse, is available at several Alberta liquor stores under the Richmond Hill label.

Taking advantage of his regular sabbaticals and research fellowships, they've made the sojourn "downunder" many times since Dick took up his first post as a visiting research scientist in Rotorua in 1974.

"We look forward to escaping minus-30-degree winters," he says more lightheartedly. But a prime attraction is the ability, in his ongoing quest for genetically superior trees, to complete a set of experiments there and then build on the results back in North America.

Dick's curriculum vitae lists a formidable 250 papers published in refereed scientific journals or conference proceedings. He has 10 chapters in published books, and two books under his name. Although the path to research money can be winding and frustrating, he has succeeded in obtaining several significant grants during his career. He holds a number of patents, and the Institute for Scientific Information says he is among the top 250 most cited researchers in the world in the animal and plant sciences.

A self-described "ardent backpacker since age 12," Dick Pharis also likes to hunt, fish, and take photos. Although he was born in Indiana, he spent some of his early years in Florida and many of his formative years in the Cascade and Olympic Mountains of western Washington.





After obtaining a forestry management degree from the University of Washington in Seattle, he went on to acquire a master's degree in forest ecology and a doctorate in plant physiology, both from Duke University in Durham, North Carolina.

So, what brought him to the University of Calgary's botany department in 1965 to embark on an active 30-year teaching and research career, and form an association with the university that continues today? "It was the mountains as much as anything," he says.

And it was the love of those Eastern Slopes and the threat to them from what he describes as "rampant" oil and gas drilling that brought him, together with like-minded people, to form the AWA in the late 1960s. "It was seeing those wildcats being punched in 15 to 20 miles into the front ranges," he says.

That's when he began calling himself a conservationist and helping lay the groundwork for a science-based but clearly political campaign to influence public policy on these precious lands. "I was just one of several people," Dick explains, seeking to spread the credit for that auspicious start.

The U.S. consulate erroneously told him that he could not be politically active here as a U.S. citizen, prompting his successful application in 1970 to become a Canadian. "Citizenship meant the chance to participate in the Canadian political system," he says.

And that he's done for many years, working with Vivian to heighten the public's and the government's awareness of the value of our wilderness resource. Through public hearings, presentations and letters, Dick demonstrated what former Petro-Canada Environmental and Social Affairs Director Tom Beck called "unwavering devotion" to defending that value.

A stand-out achievement was the protection of the 4600 km² Willmore Wilderness Park in northern Alberta, leading to the presentation to him and Vivian of the national Marguerite and Vernon Heaslip Award for Environmental Stewardship and a United Nations Commemorative Silver Medal in 1982. He has a long list of other awards for his environmental and botanical work, including the E.W.R. Steacie Memorial Fellowship from the National Research Council of Canada and an ongoing fellowship with the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

For Dick, other pleasing results of his conservation efforts include helping ensure that the Elbow/Sheep country "at least is under a modicum of protection."

While he sees the setting aside of the Bighorn region as another partial success, he is dismayed by the proliferation of all terrain vehicles and their destructive impacts there. And, while he can look back to the Peter Lougheed years of the 1970s and early 1980s as reasonably positive for conservationist interests, the Ralph Klein regime in Edmonton has been grimmer.

"The inability of elected public officials to provide direction to their bureaucrats and the inability of bureaucrats to even enforce their own (limited) regulations is the major problem," he says succinctly. Having wilderness protection in the hands of individual provinces – as opposed to a more coherent national policy, as is the case in the U.S. – is an important disadvantage for Canada, he says.

During the past 10 years, Dick has stepped back from the fray, leaving much of the heavy slogging to Vivian. His advice to younger people becoming involved: "Hang in there. Do your homework before you speak or before you write."





According to AWA Executive Director Christyann Olson, Dick has set a magnificent example. "He was always well prepared. He never proceeded without the facts," she says. That ability, combined with his tenacity, made him a formidable proponent, she adds.

He not only had considerable impact on public policy, but he was also highly instrumental in setting the AWA on its feet and in leading the massive administrative effort to establish the Resource Centre in its current location. He spared no effort in assisting with the details – and that meant helping with the layout of early *Advocate* editions.

Dick's long list of Canadian and international professional affiliations includes membership in the Canadian Institute of Foresters and the Canadian Society of Plant Physiologists, of which he is a past-president.

Any other hobbies? "Irritating politicians," he says, his humour peeking through again.

