

OBITUARY FOR Dr BEN LAWSON, 28 AUGUST 1976 – 23 JUNE 2019



Dr Ben Eric Lawson, September 2006, age 30.

Dr Ben Eric Lawson [Ben] converted an early interest in hydroponics and agriculture into a lifelong involvement in citizen science, openly sharing his knowledge and expertise in the natural world with others. Over the past decade he was a vital member of The Royal Society of Queensland Council, working in particular to expand the reach of the annual *Proceedings* more widely in society.

RESEARCH CAREER

Ben completed a Bachelor of Science at the University of Queensland with majors in botany and ecology. His Honours project focused on predicting the distribution of two Weeds of National Significance (*Anredera cordifolia* and *Schinus terebinthifolius*). He soon commenced research into vegetation mapping processes and their implications for conservation planning in Queensland. He was awarded a PhD in Conservation Planning in 2007 for his thesis entitled *The utility of site-based datasets and regional ecosystem mapping for biodiversity conservation in the South-east Queensland Bioregion: Past, present, future*. A postdoctoral research position followed, contributing to mapping of the distribution of insect agents for the control of mimosa and lantana.

Ben co-authored a number of papers on weeds, including a chapter on *Anredera cordifolia* in the *Biology of Australian Weeds* 2009 and a climate prediction of buffel grass (*Cenchrus ciliaris*) published in

Plant Protection Quarterly 2004. Other papers were generated out of his PhD, including “Relating spatial and temporal patterns in floristics with vegetation mapping: an example from Fraser Island, South-East Queensland, Australia” published in *Pacific Conservation Biology* 2006, “Delving into the Datasets I and II” published in *Australasian Journal of Environmental Management* 2006 and “Are regional ecosystems compatible with floristic heterogeneity? A case study from Toohey Forest, south-east Queensland, Australia” published in *Pacific Conservation Biology* 2007.

He presented his PhD research in stages at the annual Ecological Society of Australia conferences in Perth, Adelaide and Brisbane, and at the International Association for Landscape Ecology in Darwin, Australia (2003) and Wageningen, The Netherlands (2007). At one such conference, a discussion about databases, data, and long-term ecological research began a lasting relationship with Dr Jean-Marc Hero and Dr Bill Magnusson. Ben became involved in their Planned Programme for Biodiversity Monitoring (PPBio), including collaboration and excursions to Karawatha Forest in Brisbane (with Griffith University) and in the Amazon. Many papers were generated out of these PPBio interactions, some of which appeared in the co-authored book chapter “Multi-taxa Surveys: Integrating Ecosystem Processes and User Demands” in the book *Applied Ecology and Human Dimensions in Biological Conservation* published in 2014.

In 2008–2009 he organised and led a working group of some 14 Australian and international researchers aiming to develop a framework for rendering existing ecological classifications more fit for purpose. The workshop resulted in one peer-reviewed science publication and an invited symposium session at the 2009 conference of the International Association of Landscape Ecology. Senior researchers reportedly noted that it was the most well-organised and productive working group with which they had been involved, despite the diverging views and interests of the participants.

In summary, Ben authored or co-authored:

- 12 peer-reviewed publications in Australian and international scientific journals
- 9 conference presentations at Australian and international scientific conferences
- 1 book chapter
- 1 book on biodiversity monitoring
- 4 review articles of science-based literature.

EMPLOYMENT

Ben's first government role was in the Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Mines (DNRM), using his undergraduate skills to develop predictive mapping for a number of Weeds of National Significance. After completing his doctorate, he worked briefly at Brisbane City Council before moving back to DNRM where he revelled in translating the science into policy or, where the policy had no science in it, reversing the trend. Ben began in his familiar territory of vegetation management, before branching out to work in land valuations, and then strategic cropping land. It was Ben's scientific mind which devised the original criteria, and his policy mind that enabled him to negotiate effectively with all the stakeholder groups – including both the mining and farming sectors, as well as external consultants, departmental scientists, policy writers and legislation drafters. As a symbol of their respect for his work, stakeholders presented Ben with an hourglass, set in a sandalwood frame. The hourglass represented the fact that time had been about to run out, while a stainless steel bar set in the sandalwood marked the solid 'line in the sand' that was drawn by the Strategic Cropping Land policy, protecting premium farmland from unnecessary mining.

Living with muscular dystrophy did not prevent Ben from travelling or getting out into the natural world to pursue his personal, professional and academic interests. Ben participated in field trips in a wide variety of environments and landscapes, ranging

from central Queensland to the Amazon Basin in Brazil on a trip associated with the National Institute of Amazonian Research in 2010.

Ben was a director on the board of Spinal Life Australia, an organisation providing advocacy, services and support to those with spinal cord injuries, and a former board member of the disability support organisation CODA South. He applied his life experience to improve cultural and sporting centre accessibility, including Suncorp Stadium, the 'Gabba and the Schonell Theatre at his alma mater, the University of Queensland. He also became a campaigner for bus safety for wheelchair users in South East Queensland and worked closely with TransLink to improve fare gate accessibility. From August 2008 to October 2009 he was a community representative to a forum "Progressing Inclusion of People with Disability in Business" convened by the Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities and Children's Services in Melbourne.

PASSION FOR CITIZEN SCIENCE PROJECTS

Ben had a love of data and a belief in the community's ability to gather and share it, both faster and more comprehensively than traditional approaches to research. Ben's input included regular *eBird* counts, seasonal pollinator counts, responding to a call for Macadamia DNA (sending off bits of his backyard macadamia tree in the name of science), posting natural history snippets on Twitter, and contributions to the *iNaturalist* online community. Indeed, in the 18 months after joining *iNaturalist*, Ben uploaded more than 388 observations of 160 different species, primarily from his own back yard. More impressively, he reviewed and identified 18,298 records lodged by others. Ben delighted in the opportunities for armchair birdwatching, botany and entomology that *iNaturalist* offered him once travel became tiring and cumbersome.

He had a range of home research projects, many of which had their origins in tea-breaks in his own back yard, armed with a keen eye and a GoPro. These included observations of fig bird feeding habits on *Archontophoenix* spp; species richness of pollinators on *Hibbertia scandens* and *Wodyetia bifurcata*; and communal habits of supposedly solitary ground-dwelling bee and wasp species.

DEDICATION TO THE SOCIETY

Ben commenced his involvement in The Royal Society of Queensland in 2006 while still a PhD candidate.

His contribution as a committee member and Secretary continued throughout his working life until a handover of his roles in 2017. He tirelessly assisted the small Council in keeping the Society active and played an important role in the formation of the Queensland Science Network.

One notable contribution was the digitisation of the *Proceedings* and other Society records. What started with Ben's willingness to undertake minor administrative duties and assist with publication mailouts from his home progressed and expanded until volumes of the *Proceedings* and paperwork filled his home study. While at home with his young daughter, Ben devised a scanning project to digitise these volumes and free up space, not just in the study, but in the Society's substantial historical paper collection that was being re-catalogued by the Queensland Museum Library. Ben sourced and managed a grant culminating in a

digitised and searchable collection of the Society's *Proceedings* dating back to 1884. The project also stored original meeting notes electronically and saw the most important documents lodged in the State Library Archives. The successful tenderer, archivist company Avantix, created a new web presence and search engine for the Society, in recognition of the importance of the collection.

On 13 June 2019, His Excellency the Governor of Queensland invested Ben with Honorary Life Membership of The Royal Society of Queensland, at a reception at Government House in recognition of his dedication.

Through his passion, intelligence, generosity and integrity, Ben brought the best out of other people, improving the world around him in the process.

Ben is survived by his wife Sara and daughter Grace.

AUTHORS

Cate Melzer, Vice-President 2000–2014, Secretary 2004–2007, Councillor 2014–2015, Life Member
Craig Walton, President 2004–2013

