

Obituary: Joseph Gentili

(13th March 1912 to 1st August 2000)



Joseph Gentili has spent the last 60 years in a love affair with research and academic life at The University of Western Australia. This has been a fruitful liaison for both sides. He was one of the founding fathers of the Department of Geography and all there owe a lot to his sustained contribution over the many decades.

Within and outside the University of Western Australia, Joe's work is

known far and wide for its original and far-sighted contributions across the discipline of geography, and most particularly in climatology. Indeed his contribution to climatology is formidable. He was responsible for preparing the first accurate climate and rainfall maps for Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania. He was the first to recognize that a regional 'pseudo' or monsoon-like system operated over NW Australia and there were Summer 'Heat Lows' with mean positions located over the Pilbarra in Western Australia and Cloncurry in Queensland. These features are now routinely recognized as being important for understanding climate patterns across northern and central Australia, and whenever you experience humid weather in Summer in Perth, remember Joe, for you are witnessing that these systems have teleconnections to climate systems more widely.

Joe was the first to describe the nature of the Leeuwin Current, a prominent ocean current that brings warm water in Winter along Australia's western coast. This system is of enormous significance for marine life and fisheries in Western Australia.

In 1972 he wrote about the importance of factors in the Indian Ocean leading to the onset of weather patterns in other parts of the World. He was no doubt amused two years ago to see a major conference convened in Perth where this was being 'discovered' and reported.

His synthesis work on climate is particularly well known. His '*Climates of Australia and New Zealand*', published in 1972, remains a major work in the field. He was the first to do comparative work on climate systems of the southern continents, and from this he was able to show that the Southern Hemisphere was not a simple analogue of the Northern Hemisphere. Typically, he took this a lot further. He looked at the differences across the southern continents and began to ask what were the climate connections between them? This kind of comparative research is a major part of climatological investigation today. It is an essential part of modern forecasting.

He was one of the first to begin looking for evidence of the 'Enhanced Greenhouse Effect' in climate records of Australia, a business that keeps minds active today.

Any one of these contributions might be regarded as major advance in its own right. But in parallel with these fundamental discoveries, Joe also investigated the impact of climate variability on many other kinds of systems such as flowering patterns in the native flora, on human health, on wheat yields in WA, and on other phenomena.

Joe also made contributions to other areas of physical geography: in geomorphology and biogeography. He also visited the other 'half' of geography, human geography. In his bibliography there are papers on:

- Economic development in arid lands;
- Regional planning;
- Regions and their characteristics;
- Italian, Swiss and Chinese immigration into Western Australia;
- Refugees in Australia;
- Population changes in Wheatbelt districts of Western Australia;

and in the last few years he became interested in the distribution of privilege, social factors and school performance in metropolitan Perth's secondary schools. Some of these topics reflect his own history, and all reflect his natural curiosity about the world.

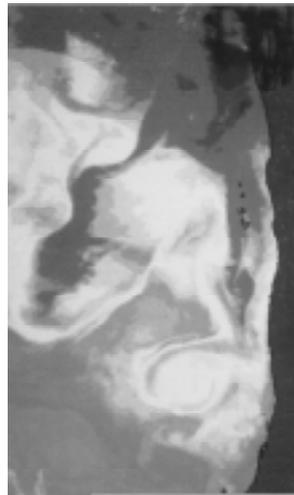
The breadth and spread of his scholarship appears in over a 150 papers, books and articles, and these have been written in English, Italian, French and German. He also had a rough reading knowledge of Russian, but surprisingly wasn't game to publish in that language.

Joe once wrote 'I have never decided beforehand what research I shall do – research has always found me, but I gladly say that I never let opportunities slip by'. Indeed he didn't. His academic life was marked by an intense interest in learning through observation, research, checking and analyzing. The success of this approach can be seen in the myriad of national and international awards Joe has received in recognition of his outstanding work and contributions to learned societies.

The other side of Joe's academic life was as a teacher. He believed students to be treasure chests of beautiful things if they are allowed to develop. He saw that the trick for the teacher was to bring out the best without imposing anything. Thousands of students have passed through UWA and

many remember him with affection. He stimulated them to learn and develop self-belief. He was an inspiring man.

In 1998, The Royal Society of Western Australia made Joe Gentili an Honorary Life member, in recognition of his long and distinguished contributions to science in Western Australia.



Satellite image of Leeuwin Current (28 March 1989) from The Leeuwin Current, Journal of the Royal Society of Western Australia 74(1991).

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