

## Vale Professor Arthur McComb

BSc, MSc (Melb.), PhD (Cantab), DSc (Murdoch), F. Inst. Biol., FAA

9th December 1936–8th October 2017

Many members of the Royal Society of Western Australia were saddened to learn of the passing of Professor Arthur McComb. Arthur had a long association with the Society, joining in 1963, joint Secretary 1967–68, Editor of the journal from 1971–1976, Vice President 1977 and President in 1978. He was awarded the Kelvin Medal of the Royal Society of Western Australia in 1997.

Emeritus Professor Arthur McComb, Murdoch University, was an outstanding well-regarded Australian environmental scientist. He had a long and distinguished career in the field, contributing to marine, estuarine and freshwater science at a high level of scholarship and productivity. Arthur consistently applied his scientific expertise to the practical application of improving environmental management. He was passionate in wanting to improve the state of environmental management, based on rational, logical and well-founded biological principles. His research approach also provided the essential modelling capability to set management targets for nutrient reduction at whole ecosystem scale, in which WA has become a world leader in aquatic systems management.

Arthur McComb was born in Melbourne, on 9th December 1936, and graduated with a BSc and MSc from the University of Melbourne in 1959. He undertook his PhD at the University of Cambridge, graduating in 1962, and returned to Australia with a 1935 Rolls Royce. Arthur embarked on an academic life, first at The University of Western Australia (1963–1988) and subsequently as Professor at Murdoch University (1989–1996).

At the UWA Botany Department, Arthur met Jennifer Chessell, whom he married in 1966. One of Arthur's first ecological publications in this journal came early in his time at UWA, when he collaborated with Jen, documenting the wetland vegetation of Loch McNess, in Yanchep National Park. Jen reminisced that it is not hard for a relationship to last more than 50 years if it can survive the mud, blister bush, mosquitos and snakes of the Yanchep fens. Their son David was born in Perth in 1974 and daughter Christine in Leicester in 1976. In 2015, David and his wife Jennie produced a grandson, Nils. A succession of family dogs, Arthur's interests in music, history, gardening, and carpentry as well as rebuilding and keeping the Rolls Royce running, rounded out a busy existence.

With a strong background in experimental plant physiology, Arthur was an expert on the control of plant growth in aquatic systems. While at first most of Arthur's research was concerned with the control of plant growth, with emphasis on plant physiology in the laboratory, he later worked with plants in the environment, broadening to ecosystem function.

In 1989 he was appointed Professor of Environmental Science at Murdoch University, and went on to expand Environmental Science there, cementing his role as a



champion for environmental issues. He felt very much at home with Murdoch's ethos and, both there and at UWA, was a constant contributor to the efficient functioning of a modern university, certainly never shirking from yet another committee or the chance to promote issues he felt important.

Arthur supervised 34 PhD students, was author or co-author of nine books, 156 refereed papers and book chapters. His former students are spread throughout Australia and the world, in universities including four full professors both in Australia and Europe, in government departments and leading consulting firms, all confirming his influence on driving our understanding and management of marine, estuarine and freshwater systems.

In Western Australia, Arthur's ability to effectively chair committees as well as his scientific expertise were recognised by successive State governments. Arthur served as Chair of the National Parks and Nature Conservation Authority, and of the Lands and Forest Commission. Federally, he was a member of the Life Sciences Panel of the Cooperative Research Centres Committee.

Arthur was awarded the Hilary Jolly Award, Australian Society for Limnology in 1991, the Kelvin Medal of the Royal Society of Western Australia in 1997, the Prime Minister's Centennial Medal for environmental science in 2001, the Australian Marine Science Association Silver Jubilee Award in 2002, and a DSc from Murdoch University in 2007. He was elected to the Australian Academy of Science in 1996, and was a Fellow of the UK Institute of Biology. Arthur was also honoured by the naming of an Upper Cretaceous ostracod, *Cytharopteron mcomborum*, by the late Professor John Neale, University of Hull.



Arthur in the laboratory in 1993 (Photo Brian Richards)

After retirement in 1996, Arthur continued to contribute to research at Murdoch through his appointment as Senior Scholar in Residence in Environmental Science. He also headed the Centre for Organic Waste Management. This seemed a strange transition but as he put it: 'When a large amount of organic material becomes available in the environment, much the same microbial processes are set in train, utilising the material as a source of energy and nutrients. This is regardless of whether that material be sewage sludge, lawn clippings, detritus in a seagrass meadow, beach wrack, the sediment surface in a wetland, or the gut of a dugong.'

He was always a generous collaborator and provided many opportunities for his post-doctoral fellows and postgraduate students, always willing to let someone "give it a go". I think he was fascinated to see where even the wildest idea would lead. Arthur said that the satisfaction he gained from seeing the application of his ecological research, and the interaction with the community meant more to him than the kudos of a paper in a leading journal.

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