

Recognition of Richard Felger

By Ben Wilder, 29 October 2015

He came to Tucson to be close to the good stuff. Orchids, tillandsias, ceibas, palms, burseras, and even cycads. A tropical world that had existed in books and imagination, until the first chance to see them in person. That first opportunity came in high school through an adventurous teacher and her boyfriend. The wilds of Álamos did not disappoint and he was hooked. A first career of marine biology, ages 4-11, was far in the rear view mirror. A lifetime of terrestrial exploration awaited.

Lucky for us he also became fixated, like luminaries Forest Shreve and Howard Scott Gentry before him, in the adaptation of plant life to aridity and its subsequent diversification. A career of careful study, tens of thousands of plants collected, nearly as many pages written, and a tireless quest for knowledge have advanced our understanding of the arid land flora of the U.S. and Mexico far beyond where it stood before he arrived. Simply put Richard Felger is one of the greatest desert botanists to have addressed this spiny topic in any region of the world.

Yet Richard's genius does not stop at a relentless pursuit of detail and accuracy presented in an approachable fashion. From his earliest contributions he has worked to open the rest of our eyes to the connection between people and the living world around them. Perhaps he is best known in this regard for his timeless collaboration with Becky Moser, *The People of the Desert and Sea: Ethnobotany of the Seri Indians*. A magical book in which each page is filled with carefully sourced insights that transport us to a profound connection between man, sea, and the desert and the pulses of bounty and scarcity along the coast and islands of the Gulf of California. A project, I may add like all good academic endeavors, was meant to be one year's study and reached our hands 20 years later. And which as Richard stresses is far from complete.

The insight and perception into humanities interaction with the world around them is visible in so many more of Richard's works as well as his protégés. The scientific discovery of overwintering sea turtles through the knowledge of the Comcaac and the crusade he helped lead to conserve these magnificent creatures, for which he gets far too little credit, is but one example. A research fellowship to travel around the world in pursuit of the world's most promising grain crops in the 1970s led him to gain more respect for what is at our front door here in the Gulf of California, nipa or *Distichlis palmeri*, a salt tolerant grass previously harvested by the Coocopah, awaiting discovery by the commercial world. His most recent efforts have re-initiated these studies and have already begun to yield promising results, which he has shared with me, may be his most important contribution yet.

When I first met Richard, in the University of Arizona herbarium of course, I had recently returned from my first trip to the Seri coast and shores of Isla Tiburón. A world of questions of plants and islands and possible differences from the mainland filled my head, the most basic of which I put forth to Richard. "What plants occur on Isla Tiburón?" He replied quite simply. "We don't know, why don't you find out, we can write a book on it." As a 19 year old undergraduate I was taken aback. I asked my dear friend and grand father figure Ray Turner to tell me a bit about this Felger guy. Is this something I should embark on? Ray replied, "this is the opportunity of a life time". As in nearly all things, Ray was right and learning from Richard has been and continues to be one of the highlights of my life.

This story exemplifies one of the amazing qualities of Richard, trust and generosity. At that point he did not know me from anybody, yet took a chance and opened the world to me. Numerous other people have also benefited from his belief and kindness including Sula Vanderpkank, Alfonso Valiente, and Alberto and Angelina to name but a few. His qualities as a scientist and taxonomists are equaled in his ability to teach. Whether in the field with a hand lens, at the herbarium with stacks of plants, or in front of a computer refining a manuscript, those of us lucky to have received his instruction are far better scientists for it.

Richard is also a man of mystery. Given enough time remarkable stories begin to emerge. The three pet alligators he kept in his Los Angeles childhood home, for which he turned up the temperature in his families heated pool during winter, much to his fathers chagrin. When he left for college the alligators went to the zoo. The drag race with a European heiress on a dirt road outside Tucson in his Mercedes 300 SL gull wing. Debates on live national TV alongside Paul Erlich at the height of the population bomb conversations. Nearly dying of dehydration on Isla Tiburón with dear friend and fellow explorer Ike Russell. Trips in upstate New York with Alan Ginsberg and Timothy Leary. I know, you are probably thinking what I first did. There is no way this could all be true. Yet, by this time I have had the chance to ask others who could provide first hand accounts of some of these events. Not only are these and many more stories true, they are just pieces of much larger tales.

He remains as voluminously productive as ever. Churning out fascicles for the flora of SW Arizona with his multiple collaborators. Book length manuscripts on the grasses of the Sonoran Desert and the flora of the Guaymas region, both near completion, an ambitious new crops research program, and certainly a few surprises.

All of these aspects make Richard a remarkable individual. It is an honor to be able to recognize the contributions Richard has made, which will be the standard for generations to come. As I progress in my career my appreciation and respect for such a precise and patient approach to science and documentation grows exponentially. You and your work are an incredible model for us to follow and at least in some small way, hopefully we can emulate. Thank you for being you.