

... do you want to be read?

An Accolade to Richard Felger

Exequiel Ezcurra, 29 October 2015

I met Richard Felger for the first time in 1981, when I was starting my graduate research in the Gran Desierto. He had published a few years before two extraordinary papers in the journal *Science* based on his work with the Seri people and his knowledge of the Gulf's Midriff. One paper described how the ComCaac made a highly nutritious flour out of the seeds of eelgrass (*Zostera marina*), and the second one described the winter dormancy of sea turtles in the Infiernillo Channel and its sustainable use by the Seri. The papers contained all the novelty and excitement that a 30-year old ecologist like me at that time might ever dream of: exploration and the thrill of discovery, the remoteness and the challenges of the deep Sonoran Desert, rigorous science, the wonderful human connection of ethnobiology, and, at the end, being published in *Science*, the most important scientific journal in the world! And, as if that were not enough, the first paper made it to the journal cover, which contained a photograph of a Seri doll made of dry eelgrass straw and cloth. The cover caption read: "Eelgrass doll made by Ramona Casanova, El Desemboque, Sonora Mexico."

That combination of good field biology, a simultaneous interest on plants and human cultures, sound natural history, and rigorous thinking was irresistible. I was, I must confess, dazzled by the knowledge, the intelligence, and the character of Richard Felger. We made good friends. In 1983 he came to Mexico, where we travelled the Tehuacán Valley, we visited the chinampa farmers in Tlahuac, we went to the Huaestc cloud forests of Cuetzalan, and explored with exhilaration and enthusiasm every imaginable market from Oaxaca to Zacatecas. With Richard you don't visit local cultures, you **eat** local cultures in the form of pitayas, chapulines, tortillas made in a thousand ways, and myriad forms of those most wonderful greens, the Mexican *quelites*, which we bought and stewed, steamed, broiled, or fried in clay *comales*, and finally ate in the form of tacos and quesadillas made of blue, white, yellow, or purple hand-made tortillas, or every imaginable form of gorditas, sopes, tlacoyos, and huaraches. With Richard, cultural and biological diversity is not a quantitative abstraction that demands abstruse indices to measure, it is a very concrete reality that comes to the market in burlap bags and enters into your system through your mouth and your nostrils. For Richard, you measure biodiversity in the richness of flavors and scents. Or, like Frida Kahlo once wrote: "¡Los colores!... ¡los olores... ¡los sabores!"

In 1984 I was in Wales writing-up my dissertation, and Richard came to a meeting of botanists at Kew Gardens. We met there, in Richmond, where he introduced me to an exciting and brilliant group of botanists from Israel and France all of which had an acute interest in New World Deserts: Avi Schmida, Dov Pasternak, and James Aronson, some of the sharpest minds of desert ecology in the world. He later visited me in Bangor, where we spent time bicycling, eating pub food, fish and chips, and British pastry, and drinking gargantuan amounts of locally-brewed beers. There, we finished the first draft of our paper on the oases of the Gran Desierto, and dreamed together about a large string of protected areas from Adair Bay all the way to the Saguaro National Park.

Many decades have passed, and we have maintained our friendship along all these years. The Pinacate and Gran Desierto are now a Biosphere Reserve and were recently declared a World Heritage Site (a fact

that proves, by the way, that bicycling, British cuisine, and locally-brewed ale do help to make dreams come true). Richard has moved on into new into new, and always innovative ventures. He does not publish whiz-kid papers in *Science* any more but rather prefers using his time to put his knowledge into books that will actually leave a Sonoran Desert legacy. Magnificent, superb books like *People of the Desert and Sea*, *The Trees of Sonora*, *Flora of the Gran Desierto and Rio Colorado Delta*, or *Dry Borders: Great Natural Reserves of the Sonoran Desert* that have put in perspective such a wealth of information on the Sonoran Desert and its wonderful people.

His ability to change, to evolve intellectually, and to innovate never ceases to amaze me. I always learn new and astonishing things at his side, and he always makes me think. It was only recently, a few months ago, that we met and had a conversation on the meaning of science and research. I mentioned something about the need to publish some of my own research in a journal with high citation factor. Silly me; he gave me one of his shrewd, incisive looks and said to me: “Do you want to be cited, or do you want to be read?” After all these years, I have to insist, he never ceases to amaze me.

Richard: all the Sonoran Desert researchers and, I dare say, all the country of Mexico owe you an immense debt of gratitude for all you have done to expand our collective knowledge. The recognition that you are receiving today is only a modest token of our collective gratitude.

Thank you.