

## OBITUARY

### JOHN FREDERICK VICARS PHILLIPS (1899–1987)

When Prof. John Phillips (Figure 1) of Blue Bird Farm, Hekpoort in the Transvaal, passed away early this year, a long, distinguished and fruitful career in ecology came to an end.

John Frederick Vicars Phillips (also known under his nickname Jaypee) was born in Grahamstown on 15 March 1899. After his initial education at Dale College in King William's Town he joined the Department of Forestry and received a bursary to Edinburgh University. He attended that university from 1919–1922 and obtained a B.Sc. degree with Forestry and Botany at Honours level. He was then appointed Research Officer by the South African Department of Forestry and stationed at Knysna where he was involved in ecological research and management of the indigenous forests until 1927. In that year he was awarded a D.Sc. degree by the University of Edinburgh for a thesis he presented on *Forest succession and ecology in the Knysna region*. It was published in 1931 as *Memoirs of the Botanical Survey of South Africa* No. 14.

He moved to Tanganyika [Tanzania] where he worked from 1927–1931 as ecologist and later as Deputy Director (Research) in the Department of Tsetse Fly Research. He was responsible for a very comprehensive programme on the ecology of the tsetse fly. Some of his staff members who co-operated in the programme obtained higher degrees on the publication of their findings.

In 1931 John Phillips returned to South Africa as Professor of Botany at the University of the Witwatersrand. At the time he was the youngest person ever to have held this title. A strong school of ecology was established through his endeavours and in 1933 he started the Frankenwald Research Station where pasture research workers, some from other countries, were trained. Among the students who worked with Phillips in those days were J. D. Scott, H. Gillman, Philip Glover and Oliver West, all of whom made names for themselves in the field of ecology.

After World War II he was instrumental in introducing two courses in soil conservation at the university. These were crash courses of three or four years for returned soldiers and were not available elsewhere. Some hundred-and-twenty ex-servicemen graduated from the course, with a B.Sc. degree in Soil Conservation. These men spread the conservation ideal in many parts of Africa and overseas.

Early in 1947 Phillips was asked to help with the Groundnut Scheme in Tanganyika which had been initiated by the colonial government in that country to provide oil for Britain. He did not accept, until in 1948 he was put under strong pressure to do so. His participation came too late to save the scheme, which was probably doomed in any case. The authorities, however, accepted his reports, drawn up in 1950, in which he recommended that the scheme

should be reduced to a 'pilot' enterprise. From 1948–1951 Prof. Phillips also acted as Adviser to the Ministry of Food of the British Government in Tanganyika. In 1951 he was approached to act as Dean and to start a Faculty of Agriculture at the University of Ghana where he stayed until 1960. During this time he was also consultant on agricultural and forestry matters to the World Bank. In 1960 he went to Southern Rhodesia [Zimbabwe] to become Adviser to the Ministry of Agriculture until 1963.

His career then took him to Natal where he assumed duty as Senior Research Fellow for the Town and Regional Planning Commission of the province. His work there was published in Pietermaritzburg in 1973 as Report 19 of the Commission and entitled *The agricultural and related development of the Tugela Basin and its influent surrounds*. Since then much of the agricultural planning in the province has been based on his well known map of the bioclimatic regions of Natal which was included in the publication.

Furthermore Prof. Phillips was Honorary Visiting Professor in Applied Ecology at the University of Pennsylvania in 1966 and during a period in 1966–67 he headed a United Nations mission to the hill tribes of Thailand. After his retirement in the mid-seventies he still served as technical adviser on the rehabilitation of mine dumps and related matters to the Anglo American Corporation.



FIGURE. 1. — John Frederick Vicars Phillips (1899–1987).

In his career he was supported and encouraged by people such as General J. C. Smuts and Dr I. B. Pole Evans. He travelled the world and through his ecological research he made contact with scientists and policy-makers of many countries. His research led to numerous publications which deal mainly with the ecology of forests, grasslands and wooded savanna in subSaharan Africa, and the application of ecological principles to agricultural systems on this continent.

The biological specimens he collected in the Knysna vicinity and elsewhere in South Africa are housed in BOL, SAAS, NU, PRE and PREM. He also collected in the former Tanganyika, Ghana and Rhodesia when he was stationed there. His name is commemorated in *Morenoella phillipsii*, a fungus from Knysna.

Prof. Phillips was a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, a Fellow of the Royal Society of South Africa and was President of the South African Asso-

ciation for the Advancement of Science in 1969. In the same year Rhodes University conferred an honorary D.Sc. degree on him.

He died at Hekpoort on 17 January 1987 after a long illness. Prof. J. D. Scott, a family friend, has fond memories of John Phillips: 'he had an engaging personality, immense energy and drive, both physically and mentally. He had the ability to inspire not only students but colleagues and others with whom he came into contact.' His daughter, Mrs Jean Pater-son, refers in a letter written after his death, to 'his terrific sense of humour and his kindness to animals and man'.

His passing away has left a void in the lives of his family, and his many friends and scientific associates, but he will long be remembered by those whose lives he touched.

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