

Acceptance of the Distinguished Public Service Medal for 2005

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Mr. President, members of the society, and guests:

I apologize for not being here: I'm sure it hurts me more than it hurts you. I am on the Executive Board of ICSU, the International Council for Science and had to attend the Board meeting and ICSU General Assembly at this time.

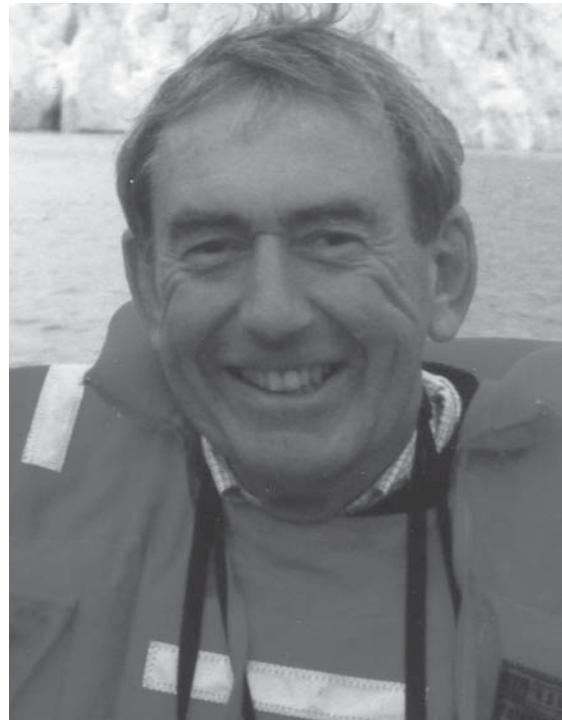
In a response like this, one has the choice of talking about oneself or pontificating. I choose the latter.

I am getting this award, for which I am most grateful, for service to national and international science societies and, perhaps, for public lectures and press interviews. All of these things should be done at a relatively late age, because I believe that younger people should be doing research. I began public service work too early, but I believed that, during the Apollo Program where much public money was being spent, I was obliged to speak to the public through the press. I hoped that I could excite the taxpayers about the knowledge and insights we gained from extra-terrestrial science and why it mattered.

I did not seek any of the positions that I held or hold at NASA, NSF, or the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, or the various offices in scientific societies. I believe that a useful rule is that those seeking such positions are often not good for them or the organizations that want them—look at national presidential elections. All of the above undertakings were enjoyable, although research can be a more sustained “high,” even in the middle of the night. Public service to science is rewarding in a different way, and you should not be contemplating doing it unless you find it fun (a number of you will be relieved to hear this).

The world found Carl Sagan, and others who informed the public on science, very useful, but some members of the scientific community scorned what they did. This scorn is shortsighted and impolitic. Few disciplines, no matter how meritorious, can survive if the public and decision-makers do not find them interesting or relevant to everyday life. If we have not convinced them that basic science is fundamental to our existence, then we have failed ourselves and our future. We achieve these goals by planning and advertising good science. Planners on the national and international scenes help keep the gears of science turning, but such planning should not be too intrusive into the research plans of individual scientists. I remember that at NASA, one of my self-appointed duties was to allow J.G. (Louie) Liou to work on the phase equilibria of low-temperature and low-pressure metamorphism, when the NASA hierarchy wanted him to work on the petrology of lunar rocks.

I don't know why I'm stating the significance of public service in the geological sciences to a society that is so aware that it bestows an important award in this field. Perhaps it is because I think that these thoughts need to be repeated periodically, even to the choir.



Peter Wyllie and the six distinguished colleagues who nominated me for this honor understand deeply the importance of public service in our field. I thank them and Brian Skinner, Ted Ringwood, and Gene Shoemaker who were the main mentors in my career.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of mentors and those under whom we study. In 1967 I was helping map Gosses Bluff, a meteorite impact structure in Central Australia. The structure through erosion had left a breached, near circular quartzite ring. One day I was squatting down talking with an elderly Aborigine. I asked him how the structure was formed. He told me that back in the “dream time” (the Creation), a big caterpillar had gone to sleep there, and one day it would get up and walk away. I had a polite smile of disbelief on my face. He then asked me how the feature had got there. I told him that a very large rock had fallen out of the sky and we were looking at what was left. He had the same look of disbelief on his face as I. Mentors matter.

Finally, I thank many co-committee members and researchers who have helped me immeasurably, and you, Mr. President, for presenting this award.