

Following the thread

What was your first experiment as a child?

I found some ants that were walking in a row. I wanted to see what would happen if I picked up and moved a leaf they were walking over. They went crazy and wandered all over the place. I was afraid they might bite me so I left.

Whose graduate student would you most like to have been (historical impossibility notwithstanding)?

Robert MacArthur. He was a very creative, insightful and curious man who had a passion for science. I understand that he was caring and supportive of graduate students and encouraged them to follow their passion.

What single scientific paper or talk changed your career path?

A talk about global warming by Stephen Schneider at a US Fish and Wildlife Service conference in 1990.

What book has been most influential in your scientific career?

Theoretical Ecology, a book edited in 1981 by Robert May.

What gives you the most job satisfaction now?

Helping to recognize and solve problems that have an impact on the natural world. Ecosystems provide humans with services necessary for our lives, and I have the privilege of working to try to ensure that these systems are not too badly damaged by humans.

What are your major frustrations?

Academia is a very competitive and judgmental field. Interdisciplinary work is needed to help solve the world's problems, yet universities and funding agencies continue to promote disciplinary fiefdoms.

What's your favourite conference destination, and why?

Snowmass, Colorado, in the summertime. It is in the Rocky Mountains, far enough from Aspen to be out of the crowds but close enough to take advantage of the cultural activities and restaurants.

What was the worst/most memorable comment you ever received from a referee?

After reading a draft of a paper I was getting ready to publish, a colleague said to me something like: "You obviously went to a public, not a private, school. Otherwise you would write better."

What book is currently on your bedside table?

The Forgotten Founders: Rethinking the History of the Old West by Stewart Udall.

You are on a plane behind two students obviously going to the same conference, who start to talk about your work. What do you do?

Let them talk and enjoy themselves.

The Internet is the bane of scientists' lives because...

...people can blast off e-mails that they have not completely thought through and are often unnecessary. I could cut out at least half of my e-mails and still get the information that I need from the other half.

What do you do to relax?

Travel to strange and exotic places, such as Bhutan, with my husband and friends to watch birds. On a day-to-day basis, I knit in any and all meetings and seminars.

Please tell us more about the theory, practice and etiquette of knitting during lab meetings. How many stitches/garments have you racked up during meetings in your career as a scientist?

The theory is that by knitting, which is more productive than doodling, I pay better attention to what is going on in the meeting or seminar. The practice is that I only knit items that I do not have to think about. By this I mean that the pattern I am knitting is easy to follow. If I knit something that takes concentration, then I do not follow what is going on in the meetings. As to etiquette, if it is a formal meeting, I will ask the speaker or organizer if they mind if I knit. I have had several members of audiences stop me and comment that I was being rude — doing the equivalent of reading the newspaper. Every time this has happened, I have spotted that on their notepad they have many doodles, so I ask if they could listen and doodle at the same time. As to how many projects I have done in this way, it probably works out at three or four projects a year, such as sweaters, vests, baby blankets and baby clothes. I began this habit around the year I went up for tenure.

What would you have become, if not a scientist?

I don't know. Back in 1982 when I was accepted into grad school at Princeton, I told them that I did not want to become an academic. I believe that I was one of the first few grad students who were accepted and said that they did not want to be a professor. I wanted to be a scientist working on environmental issues for a large company such as Arco or BP. But if I were not a scientist, I guess that I would have become a computer geek.

What single discovery, invention or innovation would most improve your life?

Hiring a personal chef would make all the difference in my immediate life. At another



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level, the invention of viable alternatives to our fossil-fuel addiction.

Do you have a burning ambition to do or learn something of no practical or immediate value? See as many birds in the world as possible.

Under what conditions do you have your greatest and most inspired ideas?

Just as I am going to sleep — it causes sleepless nights.

What's the most interesting thing in your fridge?

Twelve containers of coffee yoghurt. Besides knitting, I am known for eating coffee yoghurt for lunch at work each day.

Why is physics so hard?

It isn't. Our culture has instilled in the majority of people that mathematics and science are impossible to understand.

What music would you have played at your funeral?

I would have a friend of my husband pick *Freight Train* on the guitar, the song my husband always plays each time he picks up the guitar.

What's just around the corner?

A mass extinction event regardless of what we do. We do, however, have the ability to lessen the number of species that could go extinct.

What would you have written on your gravestone?

She helped. ■