

## Appreciation of Neil Macgregor

I am deeply sorry to inform our readers that Professor Neil Macgregor, the founding Co-Editor of the Journal of Organic Systems (JOS), died on Wednesday the 16<sup>th</sup> of September, 2009. Neil was cremated in a plain organic coffin, after a family funeral, in Palmerston North, on the North Island of New Zealand, where Neil had lived since the early '70s. Our thoughts are with Patricia, Neil's wife, and Neil's children, grandchildren and extended family and friends at this sad time.

After learning that Neil was in hospital I wrote him a letter that was read to him, and he characteristically smiled. He died the next day. Neil had asked that those who wish to do something in response to this news be encouraged to plant trees and make compost to nourish the soil.

I first got to know Neil at the International Federation of Agricultural Movements (IFOAM) Conference in Christchurch (NZ) in 1994, and when I visited his group at Massey University to give a presentation on 'sustainable agriculture'. We immediately recognised one another as kindred spirits, with similar interests and positions – Professors concerned with soil ecology – and we shared broader concerns, including the promotion and practice of socially responsible science and international development, ecological sustainability, and the enablement of universal wellbeing and meaningful living.

Although we maintained occasional contact from then on, it was not until we were asked by our mutual friend Brendan Hoare to become the Founding Co-Editors of JOS that we became deeply acquainted.

Working together over the past six years (we spoke on the phone every couple of weeks, and exchanged thousands of emails) has been an absolute joy. For me, it was like finding a long-lost brother, and we both delighted in having a colleague and friend with whom to share ideas, concerns, papers, and our personal 'goings-on', while we collaborated in enabling the publication of our refereed journal; the only one in the Southern Hemisphere in which those concerned with 'organic systems' can publish their findings and ideas.

While reflecting on our loss, it has been helpful for me to recall Neil's passions and many achievements. It is significant that before talking about the JOS papers, we invariably spoke about our partners and families who, through their tolerance and support, have also been responsible for the issues of JOS that have been published.

In 1973, Neil was appointed Lecturer in Soil Microbiology in the Soil Science Department (which subsequently became the Soil and Earth Sciences Group of the Institute of Natural Resources) at Massey University (where his wife Patricia was for a time a member of the library staff). He had graduated with a BSc and then MSc from the University of Otago (NZ) in 1961 (while there, Neil was also a keen rugby player), and a PhD from Cornell University (USA) in 1968. Prior to coming to Massey, Neil had held research and/or teaching positions at Cornell University (where as a Doctoral student with Professor Martin Alexander, he had been inspired by this world-leader in soil microbiology), the University of Arizona in Tucson, the University of Wisconsin in Madison, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna, the Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique (INRA) in Montpellier, and Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda (where Neil was a visiting Professor for a short time).

From 1991-1999 he was an academic member of the University Council of Massey University, and from 1985-1989 he was national Vice President and then President of the Association of University Teachers in New Zealand (AUTNZ).

While at the University of Wisconsin Neil formed a life-long friendship with Dr Dennis Keeney, who collaborated with Neil during sabbaticals at Massey; working especially on nitrogen transformations in pasture soils.

Although Neil's primary research areas were soil biology and biochemistry, soil microbial ecology (especially nitrogen fixation and the use of microbial inoculants), and microbial genetics, he also conducted research on and spoke publicly about nutrient cycling, soil and water quality, land disposal of rural and urban waste, composting, organic and ecologically sustainable farming systems, livestock health, and the experimental use of reporter genes in soil microbial ecology studies. In all of these areas, Neil did ground-breaking work that laid the foundation for others to follow.

As a Trustee of Physicians and Scientists for Responsible Genetics, Neil made several presentations (with his long-time 'scientific buddy' at Massey, Dr Max Turner) to the New Zealand government in which he argued that the "assessment of the possible genetic pollution of the soil environment is being ignored in the rush to develop and field test ... GE plants and animals. Horizontal gene transfer [which Neil had demonstrated between added rhizobia and resident rhizobia] is probably common among soil organisms". Neil and his colleagues were concerned that such "below ground information about the effects of GE-plants and animals is ... still rare and extremely fragmented"...and "that biological mechanisms in soil will likely play a crucial role in [determining] how GE and other production technologies should be developed, if at all". Neil was particularly concerned that there needs to be research conducted on below-ground effects of GE materials, and much more public access to information and debate before the release of any GE plants and animals in New Zealand (and elsewhere). He wrote about this in '*Footprints of Genetic Engineering in Agriculture*' (pp. 179-185 in R. Prebble [Ed.], **Designer Genes: the New Zealand guide to the issues, facts and theories about genetic engineering**. Wellington, NZ: Dark Horse).



**The late Professor Neil Macgregor, founding Co-Editor of the Journal of Organic Systems.**  
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In collaboration with colleagues and research students Neil published or delivered over 100 papers, book chapters, expert reports, and conference presentations. Neil was a member of the IFOAM Programme Committee for the First IFOAM Conference on 'Animals in Organic Production', at the University of Minnesota in 2006. In 2007 Neil was IFOAM's chief contributor to the 'International Assessment of Agriculture and Technology for Development' (IAASTD) report (<http://www.agassessment.org/>).

In 2001, at a BioGro Conference at Massey University, Neil was the recipient of New Zealand's first 'Lifetime Service to Organics Award'. There was little doubt as to who was most deserving of this award. Many of the attendees at the event were Neil's past students, who owed much to his leadership and love of sharing knowledge, and who were enabled to express their appreciation.

With his old friend Max Turner, who remembers Neil as "scrupulously honest, nattily-attired, authoritative...but modest and private, a true academic, who absolutely loved his microbiology and family", I grieve at "the loss, so early, of Neil's friendship and valued inputs and insights". As he so often said to others, "thanks ol buddy".

We at JOS are enormously grateful for having benefitted throughout our years of establishment from Neil's wise council, extensive knowledge, hard work, collegiality, and great sense of humour. We will miss Neil and remember him with considerable gratitude. And we send out deep thoughts of appreciation and shared loss to the members of Neil's family, especially Patricia, his wife, and his family, who he so loved.

Professor Stuart B. Hill, Co-Editor of JOS  
20 October, 2009