

Awards and Citations

Response by Anna K. Behrensmeyer for the presentation of the 2018 Paleontological Society Medal



I am deeply honored and humbled to receive the Paleontological Society Medal, also very grateful to all of the people who have contributed their inspiration and support to my career. Among them is Scott Wing, whom I sincerely thank for his kind introductory remarks, and I also thank those who nominated me for this award. I would like to reflect upon some milestones in my professional life, but first I will recount a short story from my personal “Deep Time.”

As a newly minted Ph.D. and post-doctoral fellow at UC Berkeley, I enjoyed the friendship of Diane Gifford-Gonzalez, a zooarcheological graduate student interested in taphonomy. We commiserated about whether we would ever find jobs as Taphonomists and came up with a back-up plan—to start a company (in California, of course) called Dial-a-Taph. This would provide expert advice to people who wanted to become fossils—for a fee, naturally. It was the 1970s, a time of interest in cryo-preservation, capsules that sent departed loved ones into space, pet cemeteries...why not find our own niche in “Fossilization for Eternity?” Imagine the self-help books, the T-shirts, the billboards (pre-internet, of course). We had the knowledge...!

Fortunately, this business venture wasn’t necessary—we both got jobs after some years as post-docs. But the fun of thinking outside the box with Diane and many others over the years has been essential fuel for my research and creative thinking. I’ve been fortunate to connect with wonderful people and have adventures with many of them who became lifelong friends. It is one of the very best things about being a field scientist and paleontologist, and I regard this award as a tribute to them as well.

I arrived at Harvard with a geological background that included training at Indiana University’s Geological Field Station in Montana, but knowing relatively little about paleontology. I remember vividly the first meeting with my graduate committee, which included Alfred S. Romer, Stephen J. Gould, and my advisor Bryan Patterson, where I declared that I wanted to be “interdisciplinary.” They were highly skeptical, warning me that in order to get a job as a paleontologist, one had to “specialize.” But I was convinced that there was exciting potential in the sedimentary and ecological context of fossils as well as in the fossils themselves. I encountered the word “taphonomy” for the first time on a field project in the Paleocene of Wyoming, where the Ft. Union Formation had deposits with mixed fossil remains of land mammals, marine fish, and charcoal. What could this mean? Answering such questions required interdisciplinary thinking, and I soon found myself in the emerging field of taphonomy.

There are so many ways to be a paleontologist. Much of what I have accomplished has been as a member or leader of research teams. Richard E. Leakey, Glynn L. Isaac, and David R. Pilbeam provided early role models for how to run successful research expeditions, balancing science with diplomacy and fairness to all who contributed to shared research goals. I have benefitted greatly from synergism at the boundaries of paleontology, geology, biology, ecology, geochemistry, and anthropology, and from the extended family of mentors, colleagues, and students in these diverse fields who have made my career productive and great fun as well.

Speaking of fun...Taphonomy—death, destruction, and preservation—can be funny, especially when viewed from the perspective of geological time. One of my favorite quotes is from Susan Kidwell, who memorably stated, “Life after death is risky!” Indeed...but this also makes one think seriously about fossilization as the exception to the general rule of natural recycling. Nutrients are at a premium in natural systems, thus our view of life over time is shaped by processes representing “unusual” circumstances, at many different scales, that temporarily shut down or impede recycling. I think we have only scratched the surface of megabiases that lurk in natural and

human-affected controls on recycling versus preservation—the still mysterious world of the Earth’s evolving “Taphosystem.”

When I was hired at the National Museum of Natural History, I could hardly believe my good fortune, since the Illinois State Museum and Field Museum in Chicago were the iconic inspirations of my childhood. I deeply appreciate and thank the Smithsonian Institution, where the dual goal of “Increase and Diffusion of Knowledge” continues to be THE guiding principle. Research curators and staff are given the freedom and resources to explore, create, and bring together people in long-term research programs such as “ETE”—the Evolution of Terrestrial Ecosystems Program. We are scientists for the people, supported by the people, dedicated to the highest quality research, collections care, and public education in many different forms. We are doing our best to educate and inspire citizens for a changing planet.

On a personal note, I thank my family for motivating me to become a natural scientist and paleobiologist. My architect father expounded on the wonders of science around the dinner table, my aunts gave me intriguing specimens and books, and my mother made sure that I had every opportunity to succeed as a professional woman. They taught me how “creative sparks” can fly when people share ideas and discover things together. Central in the last 30+ years of my life are my husband, Bill Keyser, and our daughters Kristina and Sarah. Bill was an essential part of many field projects before the girls came along, then he looked after them while I went off to the field. For a number of years when they were old enough, we all went together. Papa

Bill was always there for us—and still is. I thank him for his huge role in my achievements and my happiness.

The latest chapter in my career at NMNH has been the complete renovation of our Fossil Halls—the Deep Time Initiative—truly an extraordinary experience in science-education-art-communications-exhibit team creativity. The new exhibit, opening in June, 2019, will have the Nation’s *Tyrannosaurus rex* and our re-mounted classic fossils, but we also are including the present and future in the sweeping story of life on earth. Paleoecology and Taphonomy are in the mix as well, and I am particularly happy that my long-ago Berkeley dream of showing people “How to Become a Fossil” has become a reality in a new interactive game—and it is free advice! There also is a “Decomposing Lizard” time-lapse video, a candidate for our most popular interactive media piece ... but that is another story.

This is a great time to be a paleontologist—the field is ever more vibrant and exciting as we discover new ways to reveal the amazing story of life on earth and communicate it to the public. The Paleontological Society has been a lasting source of inspiration for me, and I am truly grateful for the recognition represented by this award. In the future it is my hope that growing diversity in our field will lead to similar recognition for others who represent different paths to success as paleontologists.

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