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Distinguished Scholar Award

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Journal of Latin American Geography, Volume 1, Number 1, 2002, pp. 126-128
(Article)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lag.2007.0031>



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Thomas T. Veblen**Recipient of the 2000 Carl O. Sauer Distinguished Scholar
Award***Ken Young*

Thomas T. Veblen epitomizes the field-based, in-depth approach to research that characterized the work of Carl O. Sauer. A 1975 Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley, Veblen was a student of James Parsons and was thus exposed to the Sauerian traditions. He has used that foundation to develop an impressive body of more than 130 publications that deal with themes of biogeography, landscapes, environmental history and conservation, and the influence of climate change.



His first publications were on Guatemala and examined weeds, the use of bunchgrasses by local people, and forest conservation. His first article in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (AAG) was published in 1977 and was entitled “Native population decline in Totonicapán, Guatemala”. I used his Ph.D. dissertation on the forests of Totonicapán to help plan my reforestation efforts in a U.S. Peace Corps project in 1979 and 1980. It was the first time

I had found academic writing on Guatemala that not only was directly useful, but was based on a far-reaching knowledge of the particular tree species that I dealt with on a daily basis.

Tom Veblen moved to Chile following his graduation from Berkeley and worked from 1975 to 1979 as a visiting professor of plant ecology in the School of Forestry of the Universidad Austral de Chile in Valdivia. He was also a research fellow of the Forest Research Institute from 1979 to 1981 in Christchurch, New Zealand. This extended period in the Southern Hemisphere was a time for him to mature his scientific approach, effectively matching detailed fieldwork and empirical measurements to the probing of theoretical concerns of how nature, and in particular forests, function. He was among a cohort of scientists that revealed the importance of change and natural disturbances in structuring forests. His publication productivity began during these years and continues unabated to the present. For example, his research in Chile resulted in more than 20 journal articles in such forums as *Bosque*, *Ecology*, *Environmental Conservation*, *Journal of Biogeography*, and *Journal of Ecology*. His stay in New Zealand saw several other articles in the *Journal of Ecology*, *New Zealand Journal of Botany*, and *New Zealand Journal of Ecology*. His second article in the *Annals of the AAG* was coauthored with Glen Stewart; it appeared in 1982 and was entitled “The effects of introduced wild animals on New Zealand forests”. As is typical, this publication is characterized by an attention to theoretical concerns, while providing useful information in a clear and detailed manner.

In 1981, Tom Veblen began his academic career in the Department of

Geography of the University of Colorado at Boulder. He was promoted to associate professor in 1983 and to full professor in 1988. While publications on Chile and New Zealand continued to appear, it was during those years that he also established strong research programs on the forests of Colorado and Argentina. He utilized his background in the study of historical landscapes to inform the empirical fieldwork on structure and composition of the trees. He added dendrochronology to his methods repertoire; this allows dating of the ages of trees and also the measurement of growth rates in particular years in the past. In addition, he did repeat photography, which permits a qualitative assessment of how the density and location of forests have changed from the time of the first photograph to the second. He further matched this information to forest ecology processes, as inferred from the ages and sizes of numerous individual trees itemized on sampling plots. His first book, coauthored with Diane Lorenz in 1991, used these approaches to illustrate and interpret "The Colorado Front Range: A Century of Ecological Change". This was mirrored by a similar effort in Argentina, which was published as his third article in the *Annals* of the AAG in 1988, entitled "Recent vegetation change along the forest/steppe ecotone in northern Patagonia". There was a steady stream of journal articles on forests in North and South America appearing in *Canadian Geographer*, *Ecology*, *Physical Geography*, *Quaternary Research*, and others.

His research efforts also began to be effectively combined with teaching, as he developed courses in Boulder on landforms and soils, climate and vegetation, biogeography, and a variety of seminars and field courses on more specialized topics. He has mentored nine MA students and 19 Ph.D. students in research projects associated with forest dynamics in Colorado, Chile or Argentina, in addition to others in forests in Alaska, Arizona, Tennessee, China, Ecuador, and Peru, but also including land use in Tanzania and bird distributions in the U.S. He has supervised five post-doctoral scientists and has led efforts to create opportunities for young scientists in South America. Methods used in research expanded to include geographic information systems, remote sensing, spatial pattern analyses, field experiments using plantings and herbivore exclosures, and increasingly sophisticated dating of past fires and of climatic fluctuations. An important synthesis of research on the theory of vegetation dynamics appeared in a 1992 book, co-edited with D. C. Glenn-Lewin and R. K. Peet and entitled "Plant Succession: Theory and Prediction", while many of the temperate forests of the Southern Hemisphere were evaluated in his 1996 book, co-edited with R. S. Hill and J. Read and entitled "Ecology and Biogeography of Nothofagus Forests".

In the 1990s, Tom Veblen has published an average of six research papers a year in numerous ecological and geographical journals (e.g. *Conservation Biology*, *Climatic Change*, *Ecology*, *Journal of Vegetation Science*, *Landscape Ecology*). This is based on fieldwork carried out each year in Colorado and Argentina. He also published, with B. O. Bauer and J. A. Winkler, an evaluation of physical geography research approaches in a special section of the *Annals* of the AAG in 1999. Current projects and publications include such key words as "disturbance patterns", "insect outbreaks", "effects of climatic variability", "human influences", "biogeographical history", "conservation genetics", "ENSO effects", and "fire and vegetation dynamics". In fact, Veblen is now able to look for and find inter-hemispheric synchrony in some aspects of forest dynamics. More specifically, it appears that global climatic processes, such as ENSO (El Niño-Southern Oscillation), produce similar patterns of forest change in both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres, based on his research programs in Colorado and Argentina. Thus, landscape analyses are generalized to regional evaluations, which then allow the deciphering of previously unknown global connections. This, however, first requires the development of techniques to separate out the respective influences on forests of

humans and their land uses, from those of natural disturbances and the flux of climate regimes. Tom Veblen has been a leader in this task, and has rigorously developed this expertise in both North and South America.

As is to be expected, his achievements have been recognized, for example with the present award, and also with a 1985 Guggenheim Fellowship, Honors from the AAG in 1992, an Award for Excellence in Research in 1997 from the University of Colorado, and the Cowles Award for Best Publication in Biogeography in 2000. His abilities have also been recognized in the form of requests for his professional opinions by the National Science Foundation and the USDA Forest Service in the U.S., and their equivalents in Argentina and Chile. He has recently been very involved in assessments of climate change impacts and with evaluations of forest health and disturbance regimes.

This award finds Tom Veblen in a productive mid-career phase of his life. He will create his own future, but it is sure to include even more research on the fine-grained details of forested landscapes, but as tested against theoretical expectations and as informed by a holistic, geographical and historical approach. Topics will include climate change, exotic species, forest dynamics, forest conservation, and environmental history. These represent a continuum with his earliest wonderings about landscapes with trees and shifting cultivation, which he saw while traveling in Mexico with his parents when he was thirteen. The power of careful observation revealed later in his dissertation has been maintained and amplified by the selection and application of additional techniques. It is CLAG's hope that this award will partly recompense Tom Veblen for his efforts over the last two decades. His achievements to date are a testimonial to the power of one academic researcher to change our vision of how the world functions.