



# Smithsonian Institution Archives

## Nicholas D. Smythe Interview, 1990

by Smithsonian Institution Archives

Smithsonian Institution Archives  
Washington, D.C.  
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## Collection Overview

Repository:	Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., <a href="mailto:osiaref@si.edu">osiaref@si.edu</a>
Creator:	Smythe, Nicholas D. interviewee
Title:	Nicholas D. Smythe Interview
Dates:	1990
Quantity:	2 audiotapes (reference copies).

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## Administrative Information

### Preferred Citation

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 9585, Smythe, Nicholas D. interviewee, Nicholas D. Smythe Interview

### Use Restriction

Restricted.

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## Historical Note

Nicholas David Edward Smythe (1934- ), a Biologist at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI), joined the staff in 1970. He was born on December 15, 1934, in Kent, England. He received his bachelor's degrees in zoology and psychology from the University of British Columbia in 1963 and received the Ph.D. in Biology from the University of Maryland in 1970. In 1962, he married Tanis D. Smythe, who also worked at STRI, and they raised two children at STRI.

Smythe received the major impetus for his career from John Eisenberg, whom he studied under at the University of British Columbia and followed to the University of Maryland. In 1965 he received a Smithsonian Predoctoral Fellowship to study tropical mammals at STRI for two years. After Smythe finished his Ph.D. at Maryland, he taught a course in Costa Rica for the Organization for Tropical Studies in 1970.

In the fall of 1970 he was contracted to develop STRI's Environmental Sciences Program, which involved establishing baseline studies of climate and its effect on vegetation. While Smythe continued his studies of the frugivorous mammals the paca (*Cuniculus paca*) and agouti (*Dasyprocta punctata*), he spent much of the later 1970s and early 1980s as STRI's first Conservation Coordinator. His efforts in educational outreach and political lobbying contributed to the incorporation of STRI into the expanded Barro Colorado Nature Monument and the establishment of the adjacent Parque Nacional Soberania.

Between 1982 and 1987, Smythe received two grants from the W. Alton Jones Foundation to research the prospects for domesticating the paca and for garden hunting in tropical forests as alternatives to destruction of the rain forest to raise cattle. He received grants from Scholarly Studies for two more

years to continue the successful paca program and later examined the relationship between the palm, *Astrocaryum standleyanum*, and the predators that disperse its seeds.

During his career, Smythe has written seventeen articles and book chapters on tropical ecology, particularly on the relationships between small mammals and plants. At STRI, Smythe also supervised graduate student and postdoctoral research, consulted on wildlife management with universities in Costa Rica and Venezuela, and served as liaison for STRI with INRENARE, the Panamanian national institute of natural resources.

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## Introduction

The Smithsonian Institution Archives began its Oral History Program in 1973. The purpose of the program is to supplement the written documentation of the Archives' record and manuscript collections with an Oral History Collection, focusing on the history of the Institution, research by its scholars, and contributions of its staff. Program staff conduct interviews with current and retired Smithsonian staff and others who have made significant contributions to the Institution. There are also interviews conducted by researchers or student on topics related to the history of the Smithsonian or the holdings of the Smithsonian Institution Archives.

Nicholas David Edward Smythe was interviewed for the Oral History Collection because of his distinguished scientific career and long tenure at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute as both researcher and administrator. Additional interviews of Smythe can be found in Record Unit 9580 STRI Oral History Interviews and Record Unit 9553, Conservation of Endangered Species Videohistory Interviews. Additional information about Smythe can be found in the Records of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute which are also housed in the Smithsonian Institution Archives.

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## Descriptive Entry

The Nicholas David Edward Smythe interview was conducted in June 1990 by Smithsonian Institution Archives historian, Pamela M. Henson. The interview discusses his background, education, and early interest in zoology; career at STRI; recollections of staff and life on Barro Colorado Island (BCI); discussions of his major research interests and accomplishments in conservation administration; thoughts on graduate education; and changes at STRI over the years. The interview consists of 2.0 hours of tape recording, 81 pages of transcript, and occupies 0.5 linear meters of shelf space. Box 1 contains transcripts of the interviews and cassette copies of the original reel-to-reel recordings, which are in security storage.

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## Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

- Conservation of natural resources
- Ecology
- Education
- Mammalogy
- Tropical biology

Types of Materials:

Audiotapes  
Interviews  
Oral history

Names:

Canal Zone Biological Area. Barro Colorado Island.  
Canal Zone Biological Area. Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute  
Environmental Sciences Program  
Henson, Pamela M.  
Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute. Barro Colorado Island.  
Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute. Canal Zone Biological Area  
Smythe, Nicholas D.  
United States. Canal Zone Biological Area, Barro Colorado Island

## Container Listing

Box 1

Transcript of Interview

Interview 1: 4 June 1990

Audio Recordings of Interview

Interview 1: 4 June 1990