



Smithsonian Institution Archives

Nicholas D. Smythe Oral History Interview, 1990

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Collection Overview

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| Repository: | Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., osiaref@si.edu |
| Title: | Nicholas D. Smythe Oral History Interview |
| Identifier: | Record Unit 9585 |
| Date: | 1990 |
| Extent: | 2 audiotapes (Reference copies). |
| Creator:: | Smythe, Nicholas D., interviewee |
| Language: | English |

Administrative Information

Preferred Citation

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

Use Restriction

Restricted. Contact SIHistory@si.edu to request permission.

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.

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.

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 and 81 pages of transcript.

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
Transcripts

Names:

Henson, Pamela M., interviewer
Smithsonian Institution. Environmental Sciences Program
Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute
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

Geographic Names:

Panama

Container Listing

Interviews

Interviews

Interview 1: June 4, 1990

Interviews

Covers his family background and education; his research, educational, and administrative activities at STRI, c. 1940-1990, including: Family background; secondary and university background; influence of John Eisenberg; interest in mammalian social behavior; Smithsonian Predoctoral Fellowship at STRI in 1965; experiences on BCI in the 1960s; return to STRI with Environmental Sciences Program (ESP) in 1970; significance of dissertation research on the agouti (*Dasyprocta punctata*); baseline studies of climate and food supply; STRI staff and social and intellectual changes; changes in living conditions on BCI; murder of worker on BCI in mid-1960s; problems of off-island communications; transportation to and from BCI; Smythe family accommodations; choice of tropical research over teaching; children's education; establishment of and research under ESP; impact of Panama Canal Treaties on STRI; role as Conservation Coordinator; role in establishing new parks in Panama; return to research in early 1980s; tracking agoutis and pacas (*Cunicula paca*) by camera; relationship with students on BCI; changes in intellectual climate on BCI; emphasis on high achievement in American culture; intellectual influences in ecology and evolution; movement of seminars from BCI to Panama City; consequences of increase in researchers on BCI; lack of contacts with scientists in Washington, D.C., area; origins and theory of paca domestication experiment; application to W. Alton Jones Foundation; outcome of experiments; effect of applied research on scientist's role and goals; fate of domesticated pacas; Smythe's assistants; origins of role as Conservation Coordinator; participation in education programs; poaching at Barro Colorado Nature Monument; difficulty of working with University of Panama; and current research on palm, *Astrocaryum standleyanum*, and seed dispersal.

Interviews

Transcript, pp. 1-81, of audiotape recording, 2.0 hours.

Interviews

Audio Recordings of Interview: Total Recording Time: 2.0 hours

Note:

- Original Masters: 4 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
- Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes