

## Gary Allan Polis (1946–2000)

A prominent American ecologist, arachnologist, and the most famous scorpion researcher in the world, Gary Polis was known to thousands of people. He died tragically on 27th March 2000, in the stormy waters of the Sea of Cortez during the last of his many scientific expeditions to that wonderful part of the world. With him, the sea also took the lives of a young graduate student, Mike Rose, and three Japanese ecologists: Takuya Abe, Masahiko Higashi and Shigeru Nakano.

Gary's scientific work on scorpions started in the 1970s in California, where he studied under Dr Roger Farley at University of California, Riverside. He conducted a number of ecological studies and experiments, especially on the sand scorpion *Smeringurus* (= *Paruroctonus*) *mesaensis* (Vaejovidae), which, as a result of this research, became the best-studied scorpion species in the world in terms of its ecology.

When Gary accepted a position as a biology professor at Vanderbilt University (Nashville, Tennessee), his interests were already extending into other arthropod groups, especially spiders, and into general desert community ecology. At this time he edited and wrote *The Ecology of Desert Communities* (1991), and made a number of important contributions to desert arthropod ecology. It was

also at this time that he produced *Biology of Scorpions* (1990) which became known as the 'scorpion bible' to the small, closely knit community of 'scorpiologists' all over the world. Its role for the younger generation of scorpion scientists is absolutely crucial—I wish I had had a book like this when I started studying scorpion ecology in Central Asia in the 1970s!

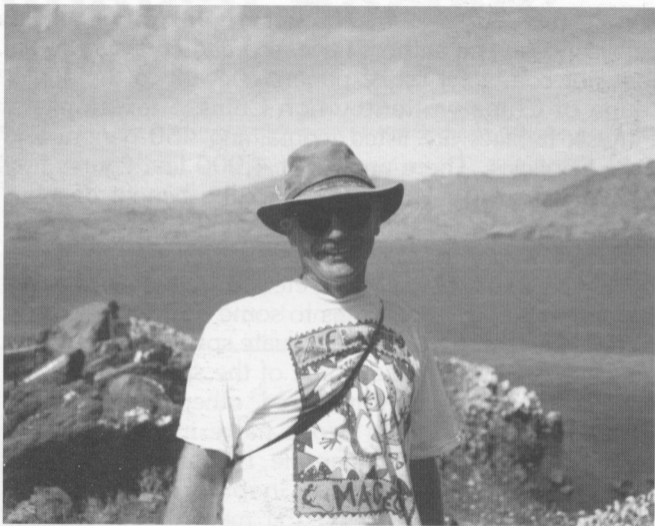
In 1998, Gary and his family moved to Davis, California, where he accepted a chair of the Department of Environmental Science and Policy in the University of California, Davis. And still further Gary moved, now into the area of food webs, becoming by the end of the 1990s one of the leading specialists in this interesting area. Most recently, he edited and participated in another book on food webs (Polis, Power & Huxel, 2000, *Food Webs at the Landscape Level*), and yet another book on scorpions (Brownell & Polis, 2000, *Scorpion Biology and Research*)—the group which was his first passion and remained so.

Since 1990, Gary was instrumental in starting community ecology research in Baja California. This ongoing expedition became one of his major interests and a wonderful event remembered by hundreds of participating people. Every year, dozens of students and volunteers gathered on the US–Mexican border to participate in the 10-hour drive down the Baja California peninsula. There, on the edge of the Sonoran desert, on the shore of the Gulf of California (which Mexicans call Mar del Cortez) stands a village called Bahia de Los Angeles (Bay of Angels). It is well known to American tourists and fishing fans (John Steinbeck used to live and write there) but still quite unspoilt. A house rented there, nicknamed the Vermilion Sea Station, was a starting point from where Gary's boats departed for the Sea of Cortez. The Bay itself houses a dozen islands, all teeming with life and, as Gary found, powered by sea energy—by food webs which start with plankton and eventually provide food for higher trophic levels such as spiders, scorpions and lizards. Island biogeography, for which the Sea of Cortez is one of the best natural laboratories in the world, became the field in which Gary raised his many undergraduate and graduate students to follow the path of ecologist.

It is impossible to list all the projects in which Gary participated, all his travels around the world, or all the students and other people he brought to admire the process of scientific discovery. A few years ago, journalist Larry Pringle co-wrote a children's book with and about Gary (Pringle & Polis, *Scorpion Man*, 1994). Richly illustrated with Gary's photos from childhood to recent times (and with scorpion pictures as well), this book reflects Gary's enthusiasm and the brilliance of his rare personality.

My family and I knew Gary and his wife Sharon very closely for 12 years. He was instrumental in helping us to emigrate from communist Russia in 1988. My children literally grew up in his expeditions and on his boats in the Bay of Angels. Gary was one of our best friends, and we will never forget him nor the others who died with him in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. Our hearts are with Sharon, their children Evan and Maia, Gary's parents Marie and Sam, and his sister and brothers.

Gary's unique light will forever be with us, and with countless people from around the globe whose lives he touched—students, researchers, friends. It was not just his science that he cherished, but human presence and importance. Every day spent with him was a source of joy, for he was not the lone outdoors type often found in our profession, but quite the opposite—a leader, a teacher, a friend, and one of the best people we have ever known. I am sure that Gary himself would not want us to despair but to live on, to do our work, and to remember him as a person who loved life.



**Gary Polis** in Summer 1993 (photograph by Galina Fet).