

Resolution of Respect

Paul Risser
1939–2014



Photo by Lisa Hoke (2005) of Paul Risser when he was Chancellor of the Oklahoma State System of Higher Education.

by Scott Collins, William Parton, Jane Lubchenco, and Hal Mooney

Paul Gillan Risser was born 14 September 1939 in Blackwell, Oklahoma and he died the morning of 10 July 2014 in Norman, Oklahoma. After graduating with his twin brother from Blackwell High School, he received his B.A. in Biology from Grinnell College in 1961. He was later awarded an Honorary Degree from Grinnell in 1994. After graduation, Risser was a Research Assistant at Jackson Labs in Bar Harbor, Maine from 1961 to 1963. His work at the Jackson Labs resulted in a single-authored publication in the journal *Science* on “Somatic mitoses in cells of *Picea glauca* cultivated in vitro,” along with two additional first-authored publications in *Plant Physiology*. In fall 1963, Risser entered the graduate program in Botany at the University of Wisconsin under the mentorship of Grant Cottam. He earned his M.S. in plant physiology in 1965 (Thesis: “Breaking dormancy of some spring ephemerals”) and his Ph.D. in plant ecology and soils in 1967 (Dissertation: “Physiological ecology of some spring ephemerals”). While completing his M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in only four years, Risser also organized and played on the Department of Botany graduate student intramural basketball team. Next, upon the retirement of William T. Penfound, he moved to the University of Oklahoma to assume a position as Assistant Professor of Botany. Risser rapidly climbed the academic ranks at OU and by 1977 was Professor and Chair of the Department of Botany and Microbiology.

In 1981, Risser moved to the University of Illinois to be Chief of the Illinois Natural History Survey. From 1986 to 1992 he was Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at the University of New Mexico, then President of Miami University in Ohio (1993–1995), followed by President of Oregon State University (1996–2002). Risser was always fond of his home state. In 2002 he returned to Oklahoma to serve as Chancellor of the Oklahoma State System of Higher Education until 2006. Other

leadership positions included Acting Director of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, and Chair and Chief Operating Officer of the University of Oklahoma Research Cabinet. He also served as the Executive Director of EDGE, an economic development organization for the State of Oklahoma. Additional leadership roles included being Chair of the Board of Environmental Studies and Toxicology of the National Academy of Science, Secretary General of the Scientific Committee on Problems of the Environment (SCOPE), and Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Institute of Ecosystem Studies in New York. Most recently, he was a member of the Board of Trustees at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, Vice Chair of the Board of Trustees of Grinnell College, and Chair of Oklahoma's P-20 Council.

Prior to his travels through academic administration, Risser was a Program Director of Ecosystem Studies at NSF and President of three professional societies: the Ecological Society of America (1984), the American Institute of Biological Sciences (1991), and the Association of Southwestern Naturalists. His early research career, primarily in grassland ecology, started as part of the International Biological Program (IBP), where he oversaw research at the Osage Site—a tallgrass prairie in the southern tip of the Flint Hills, Osage County, Oklahoma. Risser was an active participant within the Grassland IBP and made major contributions to grassland ecology, ecosystem model development, field research, and synthesis. This work led to an important publication, *The True Prairie Ecosystem*, published in 1981 by Hutchinson Ross Publishing Company, Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania.

Risser had broad interests in ecology and its role in science and policy. Along with James R. Karr and Richard T. T. Forman, he helped to develop some of the fundamental theories and concepts in Landscape Ecology (Risser et al. 1984. *Landscape Ecology: Directions and Approaches*. Illinois Natural History Survey Special Publication No. 2, 16 pages). He was also one of the key contributors to the Sustainable Biosphere Initiative (Lubchenco et al. 1991. The Sustainable Biosphere Initiative. *Ecology* 72:371–412; see also Lubchenco, 2012, Reflections on the Sustainable Biosphere Initiative. *Bulletin of the Ecological Society of America*, October:260–267). In addition, along with Hal Mooney and Jane Lubchenco, he co-founded the Leopold Leadership Program. Overall, Risser authored/coauthored more than 90 journal articles and book chapters. Even during his swing through administration, he remained keenly interested in fundamental ecological concepts. “The status of the science examining ecotones,” published in *BioScience* in 1995, was written while he was President of Miami University. Risser was a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1994).

Risser was passionate about higher education and a gifted administrator and leader. He had a remarkable ability to listen carefully and synthesize complex ideas and disparate viewpoints. Many times he would start by saying, “What I think I hear you saying is.....” and then he would beautifully articulate what everyone should have been saying, while giving the participants all the credit. Years ago after one of these remarkable presentations, a colleague said, “Man, I wish I could rap like that.” Indeed, Risser was extraordinary in his lack of need to claim ownership of the great number of important things that he accomplished. He always seemed to start a conversation when you approached him with, “How can I help?” If you brought him an issue that you thought needed further attention for his community, and he agreed, he would always come up with a strategic plan on how to move forward. Ecology has lost a person of great ambition, vision, and leadership, but never of great ego. He was always kind, thoughtful, caring, generous, charming, and witty. He was proud of his Oklahoma heritage and he enjoyed wearing cowboy boots.