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Awards and Citations

Response by Warren D. Allmon, Paleontological Research Institution for the presentation of the 2015 Paleontological Society Pojeta Award

The Museum of the Earth at the Paleontological Research Institution, Ithaca, NY. Photo by Paul Warchol.

"*As long as the beauty and philosophy of the development of life on earth intrigues the human mind, facilities for their study will be demanded.*"

Gilbert D. Harris,
first report of the Director to the PRI Board of Trustees, 1950

On behalf of Board of Trustees and staff of the Paleontological Research Institution, and its many volunteers and supporters, I extend my sincere gratitude to the Paleontological Society, its Council, and the Committee, for this extraordinary honor. PRI is especially pleased to be receiving an award that also honors John and Mary Lou Pojeta. As a student of Ken Caster, John is an intellectual grandchild of PRI's founder, Gilbert Harris, who was Caster's PhD advisor at Cornell University. John became a member of PRI in 1960, and has served on PRI's Board for many of the past 35 years. His institutional memory, active involvement, and steadfast support for PRI have been vital at many junctures in our history.

PRI and the Paleontological Society have a long history together. Our second Director, Katherine Palmer (1895–1982), was the first woman to receive the Paleontological Society medal, in 1972 (Caster, 1973). And PRI served as the Business Office of the Society from 1982 to 1992. Over the past 24 years, it was always one of our main objectives to earn the respect and approval for what we were doing at PRI from the profession in general and this Society in particular. This recognition is therefore enormously important to us.

My favorite short description of PRI is "quirky and improbable" (Rhodes, 1996). It's not very flattering, but also not inaccurate. PRI was founded in 1932 by Gilbert Harris (1864–1952), a geology professor at Cornell from 1895 to 1934, as a place passionately dedicated to serving a very small constituency—professional and serious amateur paleontologists who cared mainly about descriptive systematic paleontology (Brice, 1996). Approaching retirement, Harris demanded that Cornell guarantee to maintain his substantial legacy, which included not only his large fossil collections but also his publishing enterprise, which included *Bulletins of American Paleontology*, a journal he had started in 1895. Despite his considerable professional stature, however, Harris had not endeared himself to the administration, and the University demurred. In response, Harris took the extraordinary step (given that it was the very bottom of the Great Depression and he had almost no funds) of establishing his own separate scientific organization, and obtaining a charter for it as an educational institution from the State of New York. He transferred a piece of property next to his house to PRI, and on June 28, 1932 laid a cornerstone for a small building; he never looked back.

As Emerson (1841) said, "an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man", and the institution Harris founded was the reification of his priorities and values. Harris was an inspiring mentor to advanced students; until very recently he held the record for number of former PhD students to receive the PS medal. He wanted a place for people like him, and didn't much care whether a wider public was served or not. He passed this

intense but narrow mission (and distrust for Cornell) to his students and colleagues, who succeeded him as PRI's leaders and supporters.

But the world changes. By the time his protégé Katherine Palmer retired as PRI's second Director in 1978, the historical ties of paleontology to the petroleum industry were loosening, at the same time that society as a whole was expecting more from its institutions (Allmon, 2007). Although a number of Harris' students who had done well in the oil business had left modest bequests to his organization over the decades, PRI never had sufficient endowment to support its existence as a preserve for a small group of scientists doing something that seemed to have little relevance to the lives of most people. Located in the middle of rural upstate New York, and unattached to any other organization, PRI's uniqueness was a disadvantage as it struggled to find its place in this changing reality. It published its journals and cared for its collection. But it provided virtually no public educational programs and had essentially no public presence in its local community; more people knew about it in France than in Ithaca. By the early 1990s, the fraying connection of paleontology to industry had seriously unraveled, and PRI's basic "business model" was more anachronistic than ever.

So in 1991, PRI's Board of Trustees decided that, in order to survive, the Institution should "go for broke." They hired a new Director and embarked on an effort to become more relevant—not just to paleontology, but to society at large. They did not have a clear vision of what PRI could or should become, but over the next few years, through trial and error, the Institution evolved a coherent strategy. Along the way, we spent about $700,000 of the $800,000 we had in the bank in 1992, but we have since raised somewhere around $30 million.

In 2003 we opened the Museum of the Earth, an $11 million, 18,000 square foot educational facility (Allmon, 2004). Today, the Museum welcomes approximately 30,000 visitors a year. The building's design has received regional and national architectural acclaim, and its exhibits and programs have received national and international media attention. It is the principal natural history museum between New York City and Buffalo, and a significant regional tourist attraction as well as a major educational resource for central New York, including Cornell and other area colleges and universities. In 2013, PRI absorbed the nearby Cayuga Nature Center, which has helped us continue our efforts to unite Earth and environmental education (Allmon and Ross, 2011). PRI has also become a national leader in informal (outside-the-classroom) Earth science education, providing resources to thousands of students and teachers across the country.

But—very importantly—the rejuvenation of PRI was not just about public outreach. PRI's specimen collection has more than doubled since 1992, and now contains more than 3 million specimens, placing it firmly among the 10 largest in the United States (Glenister, 1977; Pojeta, 1988; Allmon and White, 2000). This collection is now in better shape and more used than it has ever been. *Bulletins of American Paleontology* continues, and is now the oldest paleontological journal in the Americas. PRI's staff—which currently includes five PhDs—continues the tradition of primary research, pursuing topics from systematics and macroevolution to conservation and science education. PRI staff has been central to a significant strengthening of paleozoology at Cornell at both graduate and undergraduate levels.

In 2004, PRI and Cornell signed an agreement of affiliation, formally ending more than 70 years of estrangement. In 2008, the position of Hunter R. Rawlings III Professor of Paleontology, named after Cornell's 17th president, was created in Cornell's Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences. This professorship can only be held by PRI's Director. PRI is still not part of Cornell, but this position provides yet another formal connection between the two institutions. We also now care for, among other assets, the largest plot of old-growth forest in central New York, and one of our major current projects is integrating this forest fragment into an educational program that encourages people to think about the long-term history of the ecosystems of our region.

At PRI we have become fond of saying that we have been able to do all of this for some combination of: (1) dumb luck; (2) not being smart enough to know what was not possible; (3) staff who were willing to do whatever it took; and (4) ignoring the rules, such as "you can't just do that…". For many years we were more or less a bunch of kids staying up all night, and on some of us, this now shows.

But we have been (mostly) kids who have seen pretty clearly what we had, and what we wanted to achieve. The most expensive and difficult part of building PRI—the assembling of a major research collection of invertebrate fossils from all over the world—was accomplished long before we were born. It was the last great independent institutional collection in the country without a public museum attached to it. We therefore had an opportunity to "do it right" the first time—to present paleontology as neither just dinosaurs nor a narrow esoteric specialty, but to integrate it into a wider view of the Earth and its history—what is now regularly called "Earth system science."

PRI is still a place where, as our long-time Board member, the late Tom Dutro said, "paleontology reigns supreme," but we approach paleontology as one of the broadest of scientific fields, tightly connected to everything from tectonics to biology to the philosophy of science (Allmon, 2008). So our public museum is not called the "museum of fossils" but the Museum of the Earth. It regularly integrates art and history into its exhibits and programs; it seamlessly discusses fracking in the Marcellus Shale at the same time as it treats the aesthetics of dinosaur restoration, the relationship between evolution and creationism, the evidence for climate change, and the nature of scientific uncertainty. Some people may find this unfocused. We think of it as accurately reflecting what paleontology is all about.

PRI was founded in a different world, when invertebrate paleontology was still largely the servant of the petroleum industry and the descriptive and stratigraphic aspects of the field were dominant. Harris's vision was of a place where collections of type specimens and a technical journal with really great illustrations served only "true believers," and he thought that by sheer force of character he could convince supporters to beat a path to his door. But, although specimen-based systematics remains vital to paleontology (and PRI is devoted to continuing and supporting this part of our field) that world is gone. Besides the obvious changes to industry, the world in general is much more intellectually and philanthropically crowded; there are so many more worthy places and causes trying to find financial support than Harris and company could possibly have imagined. It just isn't enough to do something that a small group of

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passionate people think is "important;" it has to be important enough to enough people to compete for resources with all of the other "important" things out there.

It is one of the ironies of the decline in industrial application of our discipline that paleontology today has assumed an important role in diagnosing and predicting some of the negative effects of the industrialization it did so much to enable. As the future of global climate and biodiversity have become increasingly pressing scientific and public concerns, it has become clear than we cannot understand the present or prepare for the future without a thorough understanding of the past. Paleontology now increasingly finds itself relevant to this discussion, as exemplified by the emerging subdiscipline of Conservation Paleobiology, which PRI-affiliated researchers have played a major role in birthing (e.g., Flessa, 2002; Dietl et al., 2015).

Paleontology has provided at least two major insights to humanity: that the Earth and its life have a long history of change, and that organisms have been profoundly affecting geological processes, and vice versa, during all of that history. As obvious as these insights may be to professional paleontologists, they are not at all to most people. In its data and point of view, paleontology is uniquely able to tell us things we would otherwise not know, and without constant reminders of which our society will have difficulty surviving in the decades and centuries ahead. How appropriate then that PRI is also unique—in its focus and its passion on this very special view of life and Earth.

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