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Roger McLean

Roger McLean's initial association with geography was an unsettled one. After completing his first set of exams at the University of Canterbury, Roger was utterly convinced he had failed. He packed up his lodgings and headed back to Gisborne. Fortunately for New Zealand Geography, however, he had managed to scrape together sufficient

marks. Whoever gave Roger the conceded pass grades could not have envisaged the immense contribution Roger would make to Geography over the following four decades.

I would like to highlight some of the key factors that distinguish Roger's contribution to Geography. As a coastal researcher he has few peers. He is widely regarded as the father of coastal research in New Zealand. Internationally his contributions to coastal process research on shore platforms, gravel beaches, coastal change and coral reef geomorphology are held in high esteem.

To chart the development of his research and its relevance to the advancement of Geography in New Zealand: Roger graduated with a Bachelors and Masters degree in Geography from the University of Canterbury. His Masters thesis concerned the 'regional geography of Gisborne'. He then headed to McGill for his PhD studies. Initially he intended to study 'Savannah Grasslands as culturally determined landscapes'. Clearly there was a change of heart on the boat – as he jumped ship in Barbados to work there at McGill's field research station.

His PhD examined bioerosion of beach rock. At issue in this study was how much rock, small snails (that live on the rock) could eat, pass through their gut and excrete. The experimental design consisted of feeding snails carbonate bricks then collecting their droppings. Consequently it could be claimed that Roger's first significant contribution was a geographic analysis of 'shitting bricks'.

In fact the study made an important contribution to understanding micro-process controls on coastal morphology. Importantly for New Zealand Geography it grounded Roger in the process framework of geographic research.

After completing his PhD he returned to New Zealand and took up a lecturing position in Geography at the University of Canterbury. Here he had a major impact in establishing process-based coastal research in New Zealand. He pursued this in several studies on gravel beaches and shore platforms. This work has been extended over the past 30 years by Roger and numerous students – a legacy of his involvement.

In the early 1970's he took up a fellowship at ANU's Research School of Pacific Studies. Here he re-established his research emphasis on Coral reefs and the Pacific – making a substantial contribution to understanding of small island development and change and of the impact of extreme events and human impacts on small islands. Of note, he took part in the Royal Society's expedition to the Great Barrier Reef and had a major role in Harold Brookfield's 'Small Islands Ecosystems' project.

Roger returned to New Zealand and for the period 1977-86 was Senior Lecturer and later Associate Professor in the Department of Geography at The University of Auckland.

During this time he continued to develop his research interests on the New Zealand coast and the Pacific and established what is still a flourishing coastal research focus at Auckland.

In 1986, Roger yet again departed for Australia to become Professor of Geography at the Australian Defence Force Academy, University College, University of New South Wales. Since then, despite his physical absence, Roger has continued to maintain research interests in New Zealand through close collaboration with Canterbury and Auckland Geography departments.

As noted earlier, Roger is recognised as the father of Coastal Studies. Indeed through his career Roger has spawned numerous academic children (and grandchildren). Few Geography Departments in New Zealand do not have physical geographers who have some McLean academic genes. As well as being the father of coastal studies, collectively with Bruce Thom, Roger is the head of the Coastal Mafia and collectively they cast a mentoring eye across coastal research in both Australia and New Zealand.

Roger is and has always been a staunch advocate of Geography. During his tenure at Auckland he worked tirelessly in a management capacity for the New Zealand Geographical Society. In particular he fostered links with the Royal Society of New Zealand, paved the way for the first geographer to be elected as a fellow of this esteemed body, developed links with the International Geographical Union, and paved the way for Warren Moran to be elected Vice President of the Union. Since his departure to Australia he has worked hard at developing relationships between the NZGS and the IAG and has been a key figure in the concept of joint conferences between these two groups.

In one of the conference's plenary sessions Barry Smit highlighted the value of geographers in seeing the big picture. In my mind Roger exemplifies this quality. He has a wealth and breadth of knowledge across the range of geographic sub-disciplines. As Peter Hosking once commented, he has forgotten more about geography than many of us will ever know. These skills have been recognised internationally and over the past ten years he has been a key figure in the IPCC Working Group II reports on the coastal zone.

Lastly, I have known Roger as a supervisor, mentor and friend. What is striking about Roger is the utter humility in the way he undertakes his work. Others are always considered first, and he pursues geography with enormous passion.

The award of 'Distinguished New Zealand Geographer' is, I believe, a fitting tribute to Roger McLean's significant and enduring contributions to Geography and in particular to New Zealand Geography.

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