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## Vicki Ann Funk (1947–2019): a short tribute

Vicki Funk (26 November, 1947 – 22 October, 2019) was one of the founding members of the International Biogeography Society and our first female President. She was an excellent scientist, deeply knowledgeable, and passionate about her favourite taxon, the daisy family (Figure 1). She inspired great affection in those who had the good fortune to work alongside her, not just within biogeography and the International Biogeography Society (IBS), but in many other societies and institutions.

Vicki initially studied biology and history at Murray State University, Kentucky, graduating in 1969. She went on to undertake a Masters, also at Murray, advised by Marian Fuller, before undertaking a PhD at Ohio State University, initially with Ron Stuckey and subsequently switching to the study of Compositae with Tod Stuessy. Her thesis on the arborescent sunflower genus *Montanoa* was the first botanical analysis to explicitly use a cladistic approach<sup>1</sup>. The Compositae (Asteraceae) remained her life-long passion and led to her later use of the autoreply email message ‘gone picking daises’ when out in the field.

Vicki was an early pioneer in the use of phylogenetics within historical biogeography. In the course of her PhD she became intrigued by the power of cladistics to confirm or test evolutionary hypotheses. To this end, while acknowledging the importance of vicariant events, she worked with others on different systems to develop a deeper understanding of how the emerging tools in systematics can be used most effectively to understand evolutionary phenomena. Thus, in a book she edited with Warren Wagner she showed how active allopatric speciation can result in geographic congruence between different clades of organisms. This book, *Hawaiian Biogeography* (Wagner and Funk 1995) nicely illustrated how multiple lineages across the Hawaiian Islands show the classic Hennigian progression rule of island hopping from the oldest to the youngest island. It became a seminal contribution to the field. Due to its popularity, she received enquiries for copies long after it went out of print. Vicki told the story of how she bought copies second hand through the internet so as to be able to supply them to colleagues, and on buying one that was \$5 cheaper because it was ‘slightly soiled’ discovered it to be in mint condition, with the only ‘flaw’ being that she had signed it. The story would end with her saying “I now know how much my signature is worth, minus five dollars”. Vicki was

never one to take herself too seriously, which, coming from such a first rate scientist, made her wonderfully approachable to younger colleagues.

What characterized Vicki’s early work was that she was fearless in her approach. This was so important to her success as a scientist, as the field of vicariance biogeography was rather closed, and the relationship between cladists and evolutionary biologists was fraught. Moreover, the community was almost entirely male. Vicki was able to navigate this environment simply by being herself. As such, she became somewhat of an inadvertent pioneer in the field of biogeography – someone who could straddle the contentious divide between philosophies in biogeography, and move ahead in building the field. She accomplished the same in other areas of her career, not the least of which was as a founder and fourth President of IBS.

Through the 1980s and 1990s there was growing recognition of biogeography as a major field in itself. Vicki was instrumental in these developments and was part of the first two NCEAS (National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis) meetings of biogeographers that took place at the NCEAS building in Santa Barbara in October, 2000 and September 2001. The primary goals of the meeting were to organize a book, *Foundations of Biogeography* (Brown et al. 2004), which would serve as a collection of classic papers in biogeography, and to discuss the formation of an international biogeography society. At the time, most of those in the room (most of whom were well-established and senior academics) knew one another only from reading each other’s work because there really was no dedicated broad-based biogeographical society up to this point. Meeting participants selected eight areas, with Vicki choosing to focus on “Revolutions in Historical Biogeography,” a topic in which she was uniquely qualified to contribute because of her recognition of cladistics as a means to the growing field of biogeography. With the founding of the International Biogeography Society in 2001, she played an instrumental role in the cultivation of the budding community of biogeographers, in due course being elected to the position of President in recognition of her leadership role. Her experience was crucial to the success of the IBS, as she took a key role steering the fledgling society towards a culture of the informal exchange of ideas (often over food and drink) and a welcoming stance towards students. Here again, she has served as an inspirational role model, especially for

<sup>1</sup> The following resource amongst others were used in compiling this tribute (pages last visited 16 April 2020):

<https://nmnh.typepad.com/files/vol23no1.pdf>

<https://rothfelslab.berkeley.edu/2019/10/23/dr-vicki-funk-1947-2019/>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vicki\\_Funk](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vicki_Funk)



**Figure 1.** Vicki Funk with *Espeletia hartwegiana* Cuatrec. ex Herzog. (Asteraceae), in the Valle de los Frailejones, Puracé National Park, Cauca, Colombia. Photography courtesy of Mauricio Diazgranados Cadelo.

young female scientists, though she did so seemingly by accident, so good were her diplomatic skills, which made her very effective in breaking down barriers and puncturing puffery. For students, she was a friend as much as she was a mentor, teacher, and role model.

Vicki was a prolific scientist who contributed to over 300 publications. She held a range of positions during her career, creating an enviable range of experiences, for example at the New York Botanical Garden (where she worked with Art Cronquist), at the American Museum of Natural History, and at the Smithsonian Institution, while she also held adjunct positions at both George Mason University and Duke University<sup>1</sup>. Vicki was an active participant in a number of societies, and in addition to her IBS role (in which she served on the board for four years additional to her two as President), held the presidency of the Society of Systematic Botanists, the American Society of Plant Taxonomists, the Botanical Society of Washington, and the International Association of Plant Taxonomists. Vicki's contribution to the subjects of biogeography, systematics, and taxonomy was widely admired and led to a number of awards, including the Asa Gray lifetime achievement award from the American Society of Plant Taxonomists (which has also set up a graduate student researcher fund in her name), the Stebbins'

medal from the International Association of Plant Taxonomy, and the Linnean Medal (first awarded in 1888) from the Linnean Society, which she received in the final year of her life.

Vicki Funk's numerous accolades attest to her outstanding contributions to science. Yet, to those who had the good fortune to know her in person rather than just in print, we will remember her for her self-deprecating good humour, her capacity to get along with people while making things happen, her kindness and encouragement, and her way of putting people at ease. When Vicki set her mind to something, things would happen. A recent example is a collaborative effort to promote the recognition of the contribution of female scientists in STEM subjects<sup>2</sup>. In short, Vicki was an energetic, graceful and natural role model who has left an indelible imprint on future generations and on IBS.

Following news of her passing and recognising her enthusiasm for supporting early career scientists, the IBS established the Vicki Funk memorial student travel fund, allocating a number of awards to enable students to travel to Early Career conferences. It was intended to publish this short tribute alongside the Early Career conference that was to have taken place in Amsterdam in April 2020, although this event has now been postponed owing to the covid19 pandemic. The Vicki Funk memorial fund will remain open to donations as a means of continuing to support early career biogeographers, a cause which Vicki cared greatly about.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://womenshistory.si.edu/news/2019/11/because-her-story-funk-list>, page last visited 16 April 2020