The Times-Independent
Serving Moab and Southeast Utah Since 1896

Dr. John Dohrenwend, 1942 ~ 2013

Summary
Dr. John Clayton Dohrenwend, a passionate geologist and avid traveler, passed away on April 21, 2013. He served in the U.S. Air Force, earned a PhD in geology from Stanford, and worked for the USGS as a research geologist. John was known for his expertise in landscape change and global warming, and he contributed significantly to research on flooding and landscape evolution.



May 02, 2013
Dr. John Clayton Dohrenwend died on April 21, 2013, at Moab Regional Hospital. A man of keen intellect, with a wry though often quiet wit, he was passionate about his work and life. He is, and will be, deeply missed by family, friends and colleagues in Moab and elsewhere.

He was born in Cook County Illinois on Dec. 8, 1942. As a boy he loved the outdoors, and his father encouraged early interests in rocks and minerals, and photography. He was an enthusiastic Boy Scout, achieving the rank of Eagle Scout.

John graduated from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute with a BS in management engineering in 1964, where he was also commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the U.S. Air Force. He married Valerie Urban in August 1964. He served in the Air Force from 1964 until 1968. He was first assigned to graduate school at Purdue, where he received an MSIA in industrial

administration in 1965. He was then stationed at Hickam AFB in Hawaii. An avid diver, he took hundreds of amazing underwater photographs while in Hawaii.

He left the Air Force with the rank of Captain to resume graduate studies at Stanford University, earning both an MS (1972) and PhD (1975) in geology, his true passion. He began his career as an assistant professor at Williams College from 1974 through 1979. In 1978, he worked for Woodward Clyde in the San Francisco Bay Area as a project geologist, mapping young faults and landslides to assess earthquake capability as well as carrying out sedimentological mapping in the Mississippi River Valley.

In 1979, John was hired as a research geologist by the United States Geological Survey (USGS). His work for the USGS as a surficial geomorphologist was varied. It took him to remote locations in the U.S. and around the world, including the study of landscape processes in the tapuis of Venezuela, the Basin and Range in Nevada, the Colorado Plateau and the massive flood plains of Northern Australia. He also studied and developed models of landscape evolution in Alaska, Hawaii, and Baja, Calif. From 1989 through 1995 he served as visiting scientist to Australia, mostly in Queensland, working with the Australian Geologic Survey Organisation.

He was an intensely curious man and loved travel. Family vacation trips were common, and included a trip to Europe camping at archeological digs in Italy and France with his wife and 5-year-old daughter.

Throughout his career he used remote sensing – first, aerial photographs and later, satellite images – to better understand how the surface of the earth changes. Ever the practical scientist, he worked with colleagues at the Jet Propulsion Lab to find ways to process satellite images with Photoshop to more effectively use satellite imagery in the field. His laptop-based image processing system was applied successfully to such diverse problems as flood damage analysis along the Missouri River and regional regolith mapping in north Queensland, Australia, as well as cataloging distinct geomorphic reaches along the Colorado River near Moab.

Because of his work and passionate interest in the subjects, John was extremely knowledgeable about large-scale landscape change and global warming. After the Mississippi River floods in 1994, John was a part of the Scientific Assessment and Strategy Team organized by the White House to provide scientific advice and assistance regarding flood recovery in the Upper Mississippi River Basin. He helped produce an image in 1998 of the Missouri River Floods that was featured on the cover of “BioSciences,” and contributed to several papers about flooding and flood control on the Missouri River. He liked to joke that all that work only proved that the flood was caused by a great deal of rain.

He retired in 1996 and was invited to become an adjunct professor by the faculty of the Department of Geosciences at the University of Arizona, Tucson. In 2004, he moved to Moab, and participated in local projects focused on water in the Moab Valley, and in the Desert Southwest. He spent time in the Cainville area near Factory Butte, and made many trips to various vantage points in Lake Powell to examine the changes to the sediment deposits as the reservoir receded.

While in Moab he saw potential for practical research about large-scale landscape changes and processes at the Entrada Ranch on the Dolores River. He worked with Dr. James Ehleringer of the University of Utah to establish a high desert research center there – now called Rio Mesa Center.

During his career, he produced more than 140 abstracts, maps, reports, papers and books including chapters in “The Basin and Range” (1987) published by the Geological Society of America, and “Geomorphology of Desert Environments” (1994). Some of his remote sensing imagery was used in the movie “An Inconvenient Truth.” Moab area publications included maps and geology text for “A Look at Johnson’s Up on Top,” and “A Review: Department of Energy’s Assessment of Potential Flood Hazards at the Moab Project Site (Atlas Tailings Pile), January 2005,” and “Paleofloods in the Upper Colorado River near Moab, Utah, May 2006,” both featured in “The Moab Mill Project” in 2006.

An avid hiker and expert photographer, he has thousands of landscape photos from his work and vacation travels – almost never with people in them. His sequence of photos showing the changes in

water and sediment levels at Powell Reservoir is both fascinating and beautiful. He loved maps and images of the earth, and created satellite image posters of many areas of the world. Some of these posters show national park lands, and were sold to park visitors by the organizations supporting the U.S. National Park Service.

Dr. Dohrenwend was preceded in death by his father, Clayton Oliver Dohrenwend, and his mother, Ruth Evans Dohrenwend.

He is survived by his daughter, Kara Dohrenwend and her husband, Ray Williams of Moab; his former wife, Valerie Dohrenwend (Belmont, Calif.); and his partner, Susan “Rusty” Wheaton of Moab. He is also survived by his brother, Robert Evans Dohrenwend; his sister-in-law, Jeffrey Hadley Dohrenwend, Pelkie Mich.; his niece, Trudy Louise North (née Dohrenwend,) Duluth, Minn.; and nephew, Timothy Wilkes Dohrenwend, Sioux Falls, S.D.

A celebration of his life will be held near Moab when temperatures allow an outdoor event. This event will be open and noticed in the paper as details are determined. In lieu of flowers please consider donating to the Geological Society of America Foundation, the National MS Society or the National Parkinsons Foundation.