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José Sarukhán, An outstanding tropical biologist, Honorary Fellow of ATB, 1996



José Sarukhán was born in Mexico City, where he carried out his professional studies leading to his B.Sc. degree in biology, at the School of Sciences of UNAM (1964). He then pursued his postgraduate studies at the National School of Agriculture of Mexico, receiving his Master's degree in Botany (1968). He concluded his postgraduate training at the University of Wales, in John Harper's lab, earning his Ph. D. in 1972. I deliberately mention his three degrees because each one of them was awarded with the defense of an exceptional thesis. His B.Sc. thesis was an investigation of tropical succession in which he applied an experimental approach to describe the floristic and ecological changes subsequent to the clearing of tropical forests. For the standards prevailing at that time (1960's), this was an outstanding piece of research, not only because he applied a thorough experimental approach, but also because of his rigorous quantitative description of the ecological changes that characterize secondary succession. For his Master's thesis, he carried out a detailed description of the tropical rain forests of the Gulf of Mexico's coastal plains. From this work, came his important and well-known book, *Arboles Tropicales de México* (1968). Both theses served as a model to inspire many students and researchers from Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America. His Ph. D. thesis con-

stituted the most thorough and sophisticated study on plant demography so far undertaken, the subject this time being a group of European buttercup species, instead of tropical trees. Nevertheless, the latter study provided the foundation and conceptual basis for his studies on the demography of tropical trees, in which he combined his extraordinary expertise in plant demography and tropical biology.

José Sarukhán's greatest impact in the scientific community, in Mexico and internationally, has been via the development of his research group, and their collaborative works on plant demography at the Los Tuxtlas Field Station, and on ecosystem functioning at the Chamela Field Station. As a consequence of these studies at Los Tuxtlas, the palm *Astrocaryum mexicanum* has become the best known tropical tree, from the demographic point of view. The studies conducted in Mexico have led to publications which are now classics in the literature of tropical biology and plant population ecology in general.

Besides his outstanding contribution to the scientific understanding of tropical forests, Prof. Sarukhán has made significant contributions in the fields of teaching and personal training of students. He not only has taught in UNAM and other universities (within and outside Mexico) but also has served as faculty on various OTS field courses in Costa Rica from 1965 to 1976. In addition to this type of "formal teaching", he dedicated substantial efforts to the personal training of his students and associates, many of whom are now internationally well-known tropical biologists. His approach to the process of constructing his group was developed with great care, intelligence, vision and a special sense of long-term perspective. Thus, during the years he was in charge of his lab at UNAM, he created an exciting and productive intellectual atmosphere which attracted an ever-growing number of young Mexican biologists, post-docs and visitors from many parts of the world. He patiently and carefully planned the intellectual development of the members of his group, which eventually led to the creation of UNAM's Center for Ecology, one of the largest and most productive groups in ecology. He did not overlook that, in order for this (or other groups) to grow to maturity, the development of appropriate physical infrastructure was a key component. Thus, he developed the field stations of Los Tuxtlas and Chamela, which are recognized sites of teaching, training of advanced students, and research, and which have become two of the best known tropical research sites in the world. His ef-

forts to support the “institutional-building” of science in Mexico have been punctuated by his positions as Director of UNAM’s Institute of Biology, UNAM’s Coordinator of Scientific Research and, over the last 8 years, President of the same university.

He has served generously on numerous committees, institutions and societies, ranging, for example, from his reviewing of manuscripts in journals, to his acting as president of the Mexican Botanical Society, the Mexican Academy of Science, and of ATB in 1986-87. He has also been an advisor to government officials of the highest rank in Mexico. An example of his extraordinary role and vision in this respect, is the creation of Mexico’s National Commission on Biodiversity in 1992.

His dedication and excellence in research, education and institutional-building have been acknowledged by numerous institutions such as the U.S.-National Academy of Science, of which he was elected member in 1994. Given this burst of

activity, I find it remarkable that he has been able to continue publishing with his associates. Interestingly, one of his recent publications is in our Association’s journal, *BIOTROPICA*, in 1995.

Given my close involvement with ATB, as a member and past-president, I am well aware of its objectives and mission; also, given my personal knowledge of José Sarukhán for many years, I am in an ideal position to state that ATB’s goals and José Sarukhán’s dedication to tropical biology make an exemplary match. ATB is to be applauded on its timely decision to award Prof. José Sarukhán the status of Honorary Fellow. This is a just acknowledgment not only to an exceptional and dedicated scientist, but also to a very special teacher and human being.

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