

Dr. Rainer Brocke

By Eileen T. Jervis

Rainer Brocke, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus at ESF, became interested in wildlife in an unlikely place during a very tumultuous time – the beginning of World War II. For eight years, he found enjoyment as a youngster in roaming the wild country of Western India while being interned by the British. For the first three years of captivity, Brocke's mother and sister were separated from his father, who was placed in another internment camp. They were reunited and spent the remaining years of confinement together until their release in 1947.

Brocke was born in Calcutta (now Kolkata), India in 1933 of German parents. His father was the director of the India branch of Bayer's Drug Company. When the war ended, Brocke's father regained his job in Bombay (now Mumbai), and Brocke was sent to Woodstock, an American missionary high school in the western Himalayas. There, Brocke was able to foster his passion for wildlife exploration by roaming the mountain forests, collecting 250 scientific specimens of birds shot with his homemade slingshot. The collection, along with unique wildlife photographs, won the school hobby show for two consecutive years. The collection is now in the Peabody Museum at Yale University.

Brocke graduated from Woodstock High School in 1950 with plans to attend college in the United States. But before leaving India, he participated in a bird collection expedition to the central Indian jungles, conducted by the Bombay Natural History Society. "It was a great experience," said Brocke. "We saw tigers, leopards, spotted deer, wild dogs, crocodiles, and more. It was rough going, sometimes riding for several hours on an elephant. But the safari was a fitting send off from India."

Leaving his parents behind, Brocke arrived in the United States and enrolled at Michigan State University, majoring in wild-life management. He earned both his bachelor and master's degrees in wildlife management and ecology from MSU. While continuing with his graduate studies at Michigan State, Brocke was offered a job as an instructor in the Department of Natural Science. In 1969, he completed his Ph.D. research on the ecology and bioenergetics of opossum and accepted a position from ESF to conduct wildlife research at Huntington Forest.

"The job at Huntington Forest was attractive because it was primarily a wildlife research position in a small, intimate station located in the wilderness," said Brocke. "Our home in nearby Long Lake was a promising rural location and a wonderful place for my wife and me to raise our three children."

Brocke said that the latitude he had in his scientific work over the next 10 years allowed him and his graduate students to conduct re-search on the ecology of the snowshoe hare, coyote, bobcat, lynx, puma, loon, and other subjects. Their work took them as far south as Florida and west to Oregon. Brocke convened a group of university scientists, conservationists, and biologists of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and Adirondack Park Agency to address wilderness wildlife conservation in Adirondack Park. The group, known as the Adirondack Wilderness Fauna Program (AWFP), was a new and unusual deviation from game management. In the 1990s, the AWFP became

the Adirondack Wildlife Program (AWP). Funded by the New York State legislature,

the program developed teaching modules for New York schools. “The centerpiece of the AWP was our research effort to restore the lynx to Adirondack Park where it had been present in the 1900s,” explained Brocke. “My graduate students were spread from the Yukon Territory in Canada, a source for these beautiful cats, to Adirondack Park where we relocated them. A total of 83 lynxes were released from 1988 to 1991 – a project that gave ESF a lot of publicity during those years.”

Unfortunately, the effort did not succeed, but paved the way for other predator restoration efforts elsewhere, including a current lynx restoration attempt in Colorado.

In 1981, Brocke became an associate professor and later a full professor at ESF, teaching a series of courses including general ecology, wilderness wildlife management, endangered species conservation, and various graduate courses. He was appointed director of the Cranberry Lake Biological Station (CLBS) in 1982, a job he held for six years.

“When I took over directorship of CLBS, New York State was in an economic recession and the ESF administrators were considering closing the station before the 1983 summer session began,” said Brocke. “I mobilized students from the past summer session to exert their influence directly on the administration. Because of a successful summer the year prior, the student influence was enough to reverse the administration’s decision to close the station.”

In addition to teaching, Brocke’s professional duties encompassed student mentoring, grant writing, research publication, grant writing, research publication, writing popular articles, and organizing campus activities. He also served on several department committees including leader of the Fish and Wildlife Conservation. Extramurally, he was president of the New York Chapter of the Wildlife Society (TWS), chair of the Wildlife Educators Committee

(northeastern universities) of TWS Northeast Section, and co-author of the TWS Policy on Wildlife Management in Wilderness. Other professional memberships included the American Society of Mammalogists, Society of Conservation Biologists, Ecological Society of America, and American Ornithologists Union.

Brocke has retained most of his professional affiliations since his retirement from ESF in 1999. He wrote two chapters of a book co-authored with ESF colleagues titled, “Adirondack Park – The Great Experiment in Conservation,” to be published by Syracuse University Press in June, 2009. He is also heavily involved in many public service activities.

Brocke and his wife Judy live in a farmhouse built in 1840 on 47 wild acres in La Fayette. “The land constantly reminds me of how fortunate we are to live among our wild friends – deer, beavers, coyotes, turkeys, and songbirds in the beautiful central New York countryside,” said Brocke. Some of his and Judi’s children and grandchildren live in Connecticut, Michigan, New Hampshire, and Alaska, and provide them with good reasons to travel. Fortunately, other family members live locally and allow them to enjoy spending time together.

Brocke’s interest in fishing and hunting has taken him and his wife to the Outer Banks in North Carolina, and to the New Mexico wilderness. “In 2003, I traveled to Zimbabwe to hunt plains game and learn about the role of trophy hunting in conservation,” explained Brocke. “Some of the highlights included elephant photography and catching tiger fish in the Zambezi River while dodging hippos and crocodiles.”

When asked for some memorable moments during his tenure at ESF, Brocke couldn’t pinpoint just a few. “There were so many,” he said. “I’d be hesitant to isolate any one as memorable. Events for me came in groups. The lynx restoration project developed “tentacles” I never anticipat-

ed – the need to involve myself in Albany politics to keep research funds flowing, mentoring graduate students, keeping our Yukon “expedition” on track, maintaining good relations with Yukon trappers, and managing projects and public relations in New York. All of these had to be accomplished alongside my regular ESF duties.”

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Brocke said that the six years he directed CLBS were exciting because new challenges arose daily. “But they were solvable with the help of enthusiastic colleagues, competent staff, and students with a unique eagerness that wasn’t dimmed by life’s coming set-backs,” said Brocke. “They were inspired by the wilderness around them.”

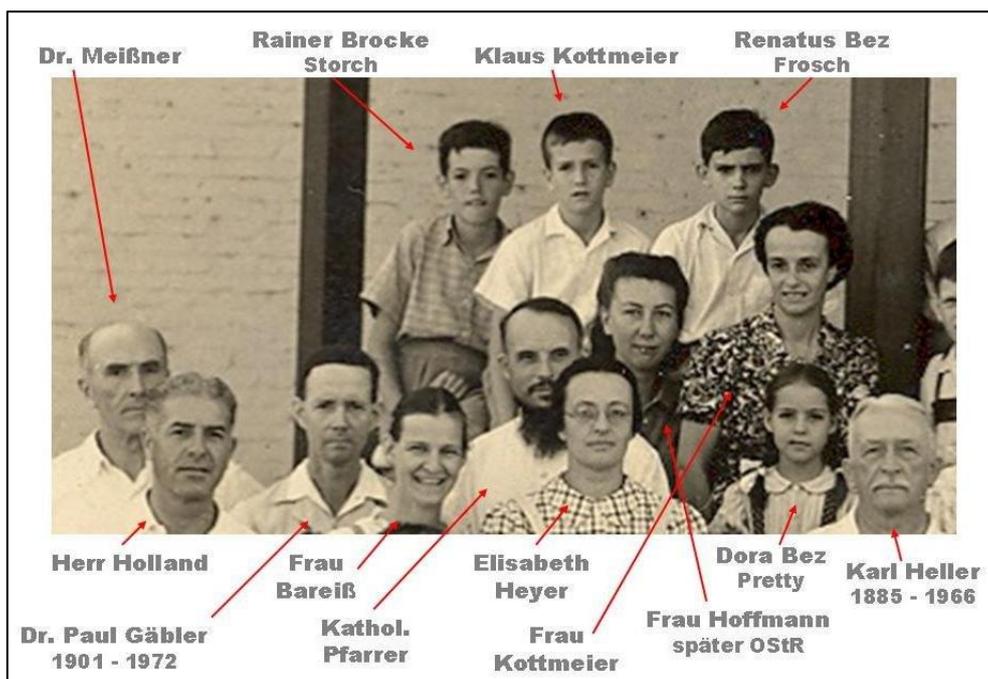
When looking back at his tenure at ESF, Brocke said there isn’t much he would do differently. “I learned long ago that much of life depends on luck and opportunity, all embedded in the drift of current circumstance and history. In my case, drifting in a

river of possibilities after college graduation, I washed up on an island called ESF – a most fortunate event for which I am grateful.”

Brocke believes that most of those in academia would admit they’ve led wonderful lives, particularly at ESF. As a member of the original Forest zoology Department, he and his colleagues have remained a close-knit – through reorganization into a large department of Environmental and Forestry Biology, and through their progressing retirements.

Pondering the future direction of ESF and its students, Brocke said that humanity both here and abroad has finally realized that our planet is over-populated, has finite resources, and is beset by compromised ecosystems. “Environmental issues have become dominant, extending solidly into world politics,” said Brocke. “Given ESF’s environmental thrusts and its imaginative leadership, embedded in a rich tradition of natural resource conservation, a bright future is assured for the College.”

http://www.esf.edu/alumni/alumninews/documents/ESFNewspaper_Summer2009.pd



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