David Whitmarsh, 1950-2010

By Andy Thorpe

David Whitmarsh, Professor of Marine Resource Economics at the University of Portsmouth, passed away in the early hours of 28th August 2010 after losing his battle with cancer.

Born in Plymouth on February 17th 1950, David completed his education at King’s College in Taunton and the University of Exeter, where he graduated in Economics in 1971. A brief stint as Assistant Master at Hurstpierpoint College in Sussex was followed by a move to Edinburgh to undertake a Diploma in Rural Science, and then a return to the West Country as Non-Executive Company Director of Capital Securities Ltd (Plymouth).

Appointed at the princely salary of £1,120 p.a. as a Research Assistant in the small (two staff, four researchers) Marine Resource Research Unit (MRRU) in the Department of Economics at the then Portsmouth Polytechnic, David’s career would henceforth be indelibly linked with research on the economics and management of marine resources. An MA by research on Technological Change in the UK Fishing Industry at Exeter in 1975 facilitated his appointment as a Lecturer in Economics at the Polytechnic in 1977. In 1984 David took charge of MRRU, and co-authored (with Mike Dunn and Steve Cunningham) Fisheries Economics (1985), recognised by many as a seminal text in the field. He was also a driving force in introducing the Postgraduate Certificate in Fisheries Economics (subsequently the MSc in Fisheries Economics), a programme that provided invaluable exposure to economic and social aspects of fisheries and aquaculture to many up and coming fisheries postgraduates from across the developing world. Rewarded for his endeavours with a Principal Lectureship in 1991, it was only natural to convert his growing portfolio of publications on technology, fishing effort and management into a doctoral degree on The Role of Economics in the Management and Development of Marine Fisheries in 1995. In ‘impact’ terms, David’s growing reputation saw him either lead or be a key participant in fisheries research commissioned by the OECD, UN FAO, the European Commission, the UK Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), HM Treasury, the UK Environment Agency and the UK House of Commons Agriculture Committee, ESRC, MAFF, and the Canadian High Commission, among others.

Although he stepped down as Head of CEMARE (MRRU’s successor) in 1991, his research and teaching remained in the realm of fisheries - latterly embracing aquaculture and emerging multidisciplinary themes such as coastal zone management and the valuation of unpriced resources. He was also a valued member of international organisations such as the International Institute of Fisheries Economics and Trade (IIFET) and the European Association of Fisheries Economists (EAFE), and served on the Editorial Board of the Marine Pollution Bulletin and Fisheries Research. Nevertheless, despite the acknowledged quality of his research during this period, his international profile was less than it might have been given his reluctance to trade-off being with his young and growing family with international conference networking and field research. Appointed a Reader (2001) and thence a Professor in Marine Resource Management (2004), and with a grown up family, David was now able to apply his expertise internationally, contributing to a Department for International Development funded study examining the Social and Economic Valuation of the Aquatic Resources of the Lower Mekong Delta, and delivering short-courses in fisheries economics in Cambodia, Greece, Turkey, Spain and Korea. Shortly before his death he had delivered a similar course – competing admirably with a 6000 Watt generator immediately outside the teaching room – at the University of
Sierra Leone, and was also involved in the formulation of projects that would have seen him give courses in Kyrgyzstan and Mexico later this year. Even during his illness he was always willing to find time to discuss ideas and issues in fisheries research with colleagues and students alike, and possessed the especial ability to captivate students with the clarity of his explanation of key concepts and ideas in the fisheries economics field.

Outside the University, David loved music, and was a long-standing member of the Portsmouth Cathedral voluntary choir. In recent years, he took up and steadfastly practised the saxophone, latterly joining and performing with the university wind band. He was also a keen gardener and relished the opportunity to show off his latest crop of tomatoes, potatoes and runner beans. He was a loyal and generous husband and father of three.

David’s personality was aptly summarised in the reference received in support of his application to join the staff of Portsmouth nearly 37 years ago, “a most likeable young man with a keen sense of duty and loyalty, and a good sense of humour” – a sentiment with which his current work colleagues would concur. Indeed, David will be remembered with great affection at Portsmouth for his quiet enthusiasm and idiosyncratic habits – not least his ability to drive his open topped car with a full cup of tea balanced precariously between the front seats. At the time of his death he was completing the final edits to a monograph on Marine Resource Economics (to be published by Earthscan in early 2011) - a fitting epitaph for a man who will be sorely missed by colleagues at Portsmouth and in the wider aquatic research community.