

Wayne Erskine

When Professor Wayne Erskine died in Darwin at the end of July, Australia lost a forceful intellect and an advocate for thorough, evidence based analysis of river and water issues.

Wayne was an extraordinary mentor, colleague and friend. He had a profound influence on my understanding of rivers, and on my career. I know I am not alone in that regard.

I will always be in awe of the breadth of Wayne's knowledge, the wonderfully pedantic accuracy, and the sheer intensity that he would bring to a discussion on anything that related to the physical or biological sciences: especially if the discussion involved rivers or fish!

Wayne had an ability to focus total dedication on the task of the moment – to the exclusion of anything else that might demand attention. That was the secret of his success – and probably also his nemesis. He could still relax with a joke and a story though, once the work was done. I remember him smiling in the corner at a gathering of my family in Sale, and cajoling his family during an epic wet snow trip to the nearby mountains.

Wayne was a natural academic. More than an insightful researcher and a prolific publisher, he sought to explain his findings to students and practitioners in ways that would bring about enduring change. Wayne was an excellent teacher; totally dedicated to the quality of his students' learning experiences. I have seen him stay up all night to make sure he had the right material ready for a class. What a shame that institutions increasingly devalue that most valuable of gifts: the patience and understanding to impart not just knowledge, but understanding, enthusiasm, method and rigour.

Wayne was a rare breed.

Who could forget his chronological notebooks: carefully written in longhand, catalogued, cross referenced and filed, recording every detail of every site of every field trip? He could always find the right book in his otherwise incomprehensible filing system of apparently random maps and data. Did you ever work with him on a joint paper or report? It always seemed to end up in long nights writing and rewriting – near enough was never good enough! And there would always be one more piece of evidence to analyse!

Wayne loved to find out why our rivers are as they are. He exposed the history of clearing, rabbits, mining and river regulation and their impact on Australian rivers. Together with others, we explored and documented the fluvial geomorphology of the Murray, the tributaries to the Gippsland Lakes and the rivers of the Goulburn Basin. Wayne loved to challenge the paradigm with facts, data, logic and deduction. He never shied from pointing out the error of others' ways. That was not always popular – probably why one of our best pieces of work – analysing changes in the Murray River downstream of Lake Hume – was never published! It's also why I had him as an Associate PhD Supervisor – I sure didn't want him as an examiner!

Wayne taught us the importance of data, evidence, rigour, insight, patience, recall, accuracy, logic and communication. Oh, and he taught us fluvial geomorphology too.

He will be missed.

John Tilleard