

## **Gilbert F. White**

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### **Great Aspirations: Local Studies, National Comparisons, Global Challenges**

Gilbert White's seven decades of professional life were nurtured in Chicago, begun in Washington, practiced in Africa, Europe, and North America, and matured in Boulder, Colorado. Over time, he aspired to help address some of the great global challenges of nature and society, but in keeping with his essential humility, these aspirations grew slowly, encouraged by the expanding scale of his scientific research. Almost always they begin with local and place-based studies of what people actually do and think about in their use of the environment, adjustment to hazard, management of resources, and in their relationship with people and with nature. Then, always working with others, local studies can be compared and, if sufficient, merged into national assessments, and compared in turn with the experience of other nations. These, in turn become a major contribution of scientific research to what will have now become the global grand challenges of sustainable development.

To illustrate, I identify five of these great aspirations listed in chronological order dated by what appears to me to be their published beginning. These are:

- Bring potable water to all the world's people as a human right
- Reduce significantly the global toll of hazard deaths and damages
- Facilitate peace in war ravaged or threatened regions through joint water development and management
- Make geography (in particular) and science (in general) more useful to the world
- Enable people to coexist with nature and develop sustainably

Not all of these follow the full evolution from local study to grand aspiration but all reflect this development. For each I briefly lay out the body of research and practice that is drawn upon, the main messages that emerge from these findings, the societal responses to them, and the current state of success in meeting the global challenges. I conclude with some thoughts on the meaning of this extraordinary life and work for each of us, for, geographical science, and for the great global challenges