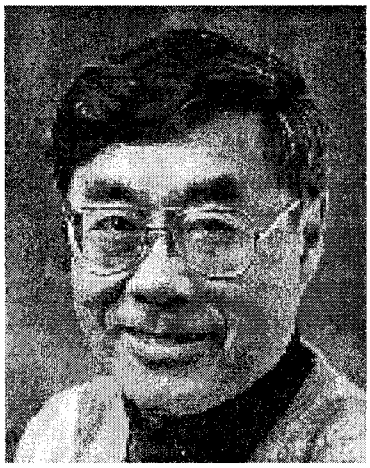
Professor Gene Namkoong



Gene Namkoong, 68, passed away on Sunday March 3, 2002 at near his mountain home in Leicester, North Carolina.

A native of New York city of Korean ancestry, Dr. Namkoong received his Bachelor of Science degree in 1956 and his M.S. in 1958, both from the State University of New York at Syracuse. He received his Ph.D. from North Carolina State University in 1963, in forestry and quantitative genetics. He was hired and worked for the US Forest Service from 1958 to 1993, based at North Carolina State University, where he also held professorships in the Departments of Genetics, Biomathematics and Forestry. In the mid-1970's he was appointed to the position of Pioneer Research Scientist, in the US Forest Service. In 1993, after retiring from the USFS, he accepted the Department Head, Forest Sciences, position at the University of British Columbia. He served in that position until his retirement in July, 1999, when he and his wife Carol moved back to North Carolina.

Gene, by all accounts, was the leading authority in forest genetics in the world. He published in many areas in genetics, including theoretical and empirical population and quantitative genetics, breeding theory and strategies, gene conservation, extension, and disease resistance. He also published in the area of ethics. He was awarded the prestigious Marcus Wallenberg prize in 1994, for his "pathbreaking contributions to quantitative and population genetics, tree breeding and management of genetic resources which form a solid scientific basis for the maintenance of biological diversity in forests all over the world." Other honors that Gene received included an honorary degree from the Swedish Agicultural University, membership in the Royal Swedish Academy of Agriculture and Forestry, membership on the Korean Academy of Agriculture and Forestry, membership on the FAO Panel of Experts on Forest Gene Resources, and membership on the Board of Trustees of IPGRI, including the last few years as Vice-Chairman. He was also elected to the Order of Honor / Camellia by the Republic of Korea, was a fellow in the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), and received the USDA Forest Service Superior Scientist Award in 1991. He served as a consultant and scientific advisor to DANIDA (Denmark), and to the Dendrogene Project of EMBRAPA in Brazil, as well as serving on the technical advisory panel of CIFOR and IBPGR.

It is difficult to encapsulate the many contributions to forest science of Gene Namkoong. A symposium entitled "Unifying perspectives of evolution, conservation and breeding", held in his honor at the University of British Columbia, in July, 1999, highlighted the diversity and quality of Gene's research. Papers in honor of Gene (published as a special volume in the Canadian Journal of Forest Research, Volume 31, 2001) attest to the breadth and depth of his research, and its impact upon our thinking about forest tree breeding and gene conservation. At the Symposium, we celebrated Gene's many accomplishments and expressed our friendship on the occasion of his retirement as Department Head and Professor at the University of British Columbia. Family, friends, colleagues and students were delighted to come together for this celebration, and to bring greetings from around the world.

Retirement did not mean much of a reduction in Gene's zeal for learning or a slowing in his generation of new ideas. His fought a heroic battle with melanoma, and he maintained an incredibly philosophical view of life and death throughout the process, all the time continuing to work on his final book. He was greatly supported in this battle, as he was throughout his career, by his wife Carol. We were all extremely fortunate to have known him as a colleague and a friend, and to have shared work and life with this truly remarkable man. He will be missed more than we can imagine.

Alvin Yanchuk
BC Ministry of Forests, Research Branch

Sally Aitken
Department of Forest Sciences,
University of British Columbia

With the passing of Gene Namkoong, the world of forestry has lost an outstanding scientist and thinker while many hundreds of foresters, researchers and former students have lost a good friend. Gene was born in 1934 in New York City of Korean ancestry; he maintained close professional and personal relationships with Korean and Japanese scientists, visiting their countries and institutions with great pleasure. However, he was widely known and greatly appreciated throughout the international world of forestry research, education and development.

Gene Namkoong undertook a large number of consultancies. One of these consultancies was to the Commonwealth Forestry Institute in 1980 where I first worked with him formally and benefitted from his intellectual stimulation and direct contributions to the Institute's progress. Together with Richard Barnes we co-authored a book on tree breeding strategy that supported the breeding programmes of many countries; Gene commented after it was finished "Isn't it marvellous how you guys can put what I write into English".

Gene Namkoong finished his academic career with nearly a decade as Professor and Head of the Department of Forest Sciences in the University of British Columbia, Canada. Immediately before his retirement he established the International Forestry Institute and became its Director; regrettably he did not see his vision for that institution materialize. He did, however, establish strong programmes in graduate genetics and undergraduate natural resources conservation and he collaborated in the creation of the Centre for Applied Conservation Biology.

It is not possible to summarize all of Gene Namkoong's contributions to forest science, policy and development. A symposium entitled "Unifying perspectives of evolution, conservation and breeding" was held in his honour at UBC in 1999; this attracted speakers and participants from around the world and highlighted the diversity and quality of Gene's research. Two of his own books remain standard texts in the field.

Throughout his career Gene Namkoong was outstandingly generous in time and resources to fellow scientists and particularly to students. It was typical of his generosity that he devoted the Marcus Wallenberg Prize money to scholarships and fellowships. He was always unassuming and anxious to explain the complexities of his science while seeking to assist with other people's problems. Throughout his protracted battle with cancer he never lost his sense of humour nor his determination to continue with his work; his wife, Carol, gave him intense support throughout and their lovely house in Vancouver was open to many while emanating a sense of serenity and calm that reflected Gene's personality. The world of forestry is poorer at his passing.

Professor Jeff Burley
Director, Oxford Forestry Institute

My first encounter with Gene Namkoong dates back to 1967. From that occasion I remember him as a very serious person and certainly he was very serious in his professional life. But later when I came closer to Gene I found that there are other characteristics that I would like to attribute to Gene such as consideration, generosity, humanism, humour, and wisdom.

From many occasions I know that Gene really cared about others. Of course the close coworkers and students were the people who benefited most from Gene's care and attention. After his decision to leave Raleigh for Vancouver I know that he did more than most to arrange for a good future for his "crew" when they had to cope without their long-time leader. During the long suffering of Hyun Kang Gene was in frequent contact with him and I am convinced that Hyun was encouraged by Gene's concern. Even in every-day life with its temporary problems he was ready to assist and comfort.

The generosity was very evident during the festivities when Gene was awarded the Marcus Wallenberg prize in 1994. He invited friends, coworkers, and relatives to Stockholm and during the dinner party he announced that part of the prize would be used for a research fund. Another example concerns a young Korean student with a scholarship from home. The unfortunate thing was that the exchange rate of the Korean currency had dropped so his future stay in Sweden would be at stake. Then Gene intervened and supported him with private money.

His willingness to do consulting all around the globe is another kind of generosity since all the travelling was demanding, especially during recent years when his health was not always at peak level.

A whole generation of Swedish PhD students benefited from Gene's teaching activities during the nineties. These PhD courses were carefully planned and the teaching was carried out with great skill. The students gave him outstanding credits in their evaluation. It should be remarked that also senior researchers learned much from his lectures.

Thanks to frequent meetings in private with Gene I had the opportunity to learn that he had a very good sense of humour. Private company with Gene was always full of laughter.

Gene's professionalism reached far beyond forest genetics and he was a true humanist in its best sense. He worked hard to improve the quality of life for mankind and his ingenious concept of combined gene conservation and tree breeding constitutes a great step to achieve his goals.

Gene exposed his wisdom to generations of forest geneticists in a most humble way, which resulted in general acceptance of his advice to the benefit for forestry all around the world.

Forest genetics and science has lost an outstanding scientist and a genuinely good human being. We who had the privilege to know and learn so much from Gene professionally and as a humanist will have him as a good example and remember him for times to come.

Gösta Eriksson with family
SLU, Uppsala, Sweden