

GILBERT FOWLER WHITE (1911–2006),
WISDOM IN ENVIRONMENTAL GEOGRAPHY*

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There is hope for a less hazardous environment, and its achievement will depend upon the linking and convergence, and the integration, of hazard studies into the larger consciousness of sustainability and equity.

—Gilbert F. White, Robert W. Kates, and Ian Burton, 2001

Gilbert Fowler White was the leading environmental geographer of the twentieth century, and his work helped shape environmental science, policy, and organizations on scales from the local to the international. He pioneered the fields of water-resources geography and natural-hazards research. He was elected to membership in the National Academy of Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, the American Association of Arts and Sciences, and many other scientific organizations. Through these scholarly achievements, and more broadly in his life and work, he demonstrated a profound wisdom.

I first came to know Gilbert through his publications in the basement stacks of Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago—which included monographs on human adjustment to floods, arid-land problems, environmental policy, and water-resources management—long before I met him in person. And now that he has passed, that is the way future generations of geographers will come to know about him and his work. Because some of my initial readings were flawed or superficial, this memorial strives to offer a deeper perspective for future readers as well as a tribute to Gilbert.

Gilbert died at his home in Boulder, Colorado on 6 October at the age of ninety-four, following seventy years of distinguished geographical inquiry and public service. He dated his interest in geography to a combination of an urban childhood in the Hyde Park neighborhood near the University of Chicago and summers spent in the Tongue River Valley of Wyoming, where he worked as a ranch hand dealing directly with issues of semiarid grassland management. He attended John Dewey's Laboratory School, which is affiliated with the University of Chicago and where students built large cardboard models of cities in the classroom and experimental watersheds in sandboxes. Gilbert earned all three degrees in geography—bachelor's degree, master's degree, and doctorate—at that university. He studied under Harlan Barrows, who also gave him his first professional opportunity as an assistant to the Mississippi Valley Commission in Washington, D.C. in 1934. The historian Martin

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