

2011 MEDALS & AWARDS

GSA PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD

Presented to
Scott F. Burns



Scott F. Burns
Portland State University

Citation by Monica E. Gowan

Scott F. Burns embodies the GSA mission to be a leader in advancing the geosciences, enhancing the professional growth of its members, and promoting the geosciences in the service to humankind and stewardship of the Earth.

Scott also personifies the spirit of the GSA Public Service Award, established in honor of Eugene and Carolyn Shoemaker by Council in 1998, to be awarded for contributions that have materially enhanced the public's understanding of the earth sciences, or significantly served decision-makers in the application of scientific and technical information in public affairs and public policy related to the earth sciences.

For one individual to exemplify the visionary charter of an organization and live the aims of one of its most prestigious awards is an extraordinary accomplishment. Scott has done so consistently throughout his career and with his characteristic joy and generosity of spirit. These singular yet multi-dimensional qualities of Scott have yielded outstanding results for GSA and for Society.

Scott is a scientist. Through his field research and practice in soils, geomorphology, and environmental and engineering geology, he has contributed to advancing scientific knowledge about the physical nature and distribution of phenomena in localities around the world. His characterizations have laid the groundwork for understanding the

mechanisms, development and evolution of surficial processes and features in places of immediate public concern. He then takes his work yet another step by contextualizing his understanding of the landscape in terms of its meaning for soils, natural hazards, land use, and human and ecosystem health.

Scott is an educator and a mentor. While satisfying his own thirst for knowledge and understanding in both a foundational and applied sense, Scott is also devoted to enhancing the growth of these intellectual capacities in students, colleagues and lay professionals. He demonstrates this through his extensive record of teaching achievements, student advising from K-12 science fair projects on up to graduate committees, and through the many professional courses, workshops and field trips he has led on understanding the hazards, unique features and special characteristics (terroir!) of the physical environment. His desire to share his knowledge comes from a palpable dedication to both supporting their individual growth and promoting an ethic of service toward humankind and stewardship of Earth.

Scott is an advocate and a leader. He is actively engaged in finding new ways to increase public awareness of geoscience and how geoscience can positively contribute to public affairs and public policy. He fulfills this personal charge to himself through public speaking in local schools, service clubs and science clubs, and to community groups and realtors. We can see it in his illustrious list of publications and his acclaimed presentations. It is part and parcel of his ever-present leadership in GSA and other international scientific organizations. Through his willingness to share his expertise and his enthusiasm for people and the landscape, he regularly captures the attention and interest of the general public on earth science and societal issues through his 200+ media appearances in the US Pacific Northwest. These types of activities are precisely how GSA encourages its members to contribute to the affairs of Society.

All of these roles synergistically combine with Scott's insight and rare talent for making geoscience available in the right place at the right moment – and translating it effectively for decision-makers and the public. The result is he frequently contributes directly and substantially to the scientific resolution of earth-science problems of societal concern, and has significantly expanded public understanding of the geosciences.

Scott is a fantastic model for all of us – embodying and living the GSA ethos of

'science, stewardship and service'. We are fortunate as a professional society to call him one of our own and to be able to honor his inspiring example as the recipient of the 2011 GSA Public Service Award.

Response by Scott F. Burns

First of all, I want to thank GSA for this award. I am truly humbled to be added to such an incredible list of previous recipients!

Second, many thanks to Monica Gowan for nominating me for this award. Working with her over the past many years has been wonderful – she is really devoted to geology and the GSA.

Why did I get this award? Well, "why" is the answer. I have a true passion for asking "why?" all of the time. I do this inside and outside of the classroom. Let me explain.

Teaching is one of my passions. With my students, I am always asking them why this rock is red, why is this landform here? I tell them that "Mother Nature is shouting out to them all of the time, and that they need to develop a new set of eyes to see what is happening, and a new set of ears to hear what she is telling them". It is being a forensic scientist – you are asking why did something happen. It is important to teach them how I got there to my conclusions so they can get there the next time.

I take that passion outside of the classroom and use the same approach when dealing with the public. When I am giving a talk to interested citizens on a geological topic such as landslide, earthquake, or radon hazards or the great Missoula Floods, I ask them to do the same thing – ask why. Develop a new set of eyes and ears!

I enjoy working with the news media and helping them develop a story for their audience using the same approach. Why did this landslide happen? What are the implications for us? How can we apply these ideas to our lives? I want to show them how to become forensic reporters. Right after the recent Japanese earthquake, I spent 24 hours helping explain why we on the Cascadia Margin should pay attention to this incredible event – it was the exact scenario for the Big One that will happen in the Pacific Northwest in the future.

Through the written word, I love turning non-geologists onto geology. Mother Nature is shouting out to all of us all of the time – get out and talk to her! Why is the Grand Coulee there? Why is the reason for that erosional line in the Columbia Gorge?

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When working with producers and directors of films, I use the same approach. What is the essential science that needs to be conveyed in a short period of time? It explains why.

So many of us use the same approach. There are many in this room who are more deserving than me, because we reach out to

the public and pass on our passions for the earth. Special thanks to all of you who do that! Thanks to all of you who volunteer and reach out to the public and help other in making important decisions for society.

For those who do not use that approach, I encourage you to develop a similar approach. As geologists we have been given an

incredible ability to listen to Mother Nature and hear her. Pass it on! Turn your passions for geology into public service.

Many thanks to all of my colleagues, mentors, students and family – I have really enjoyed learning from you.