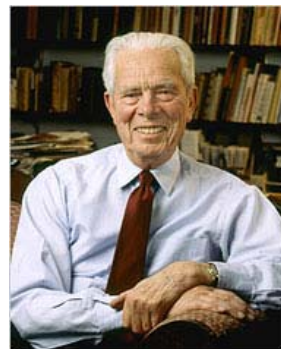


## Gilbert F. White, 94, Expert on Floods and Nature, Dies

By JOHN SCHWARTZ  
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Gilbert F. White, a geographer whose philosophy of accommodating nature instead of trying to master it had profound effects on policy and environmental thought, died on Thursday at his home in Boulder, Colo. He was 94.



Gilbert F. White

University of Colorado

His death was announced by the [University of Colorado](#), where he was Gustavson distinguished professor emeritus of geography. He officially retired in 1980.

Dr. White's early work focused on flood control, with the seeds of a revolution planted in his doctoral dissertation at the [University of Chicago](#) in 1942. "Floods are 'acts of god,' but flood losses are largely acts of man," he wrote.

Instead of simply building dams, levees and other controls that can actually encourage development in vulnerable areas, he argued, society should reduce risks by steps like discouraging such development. His ideas and advocacy led to the creation of the National Flood Insurance Program in the United States and programs to manage flood plains around the world.

"His influence and contribution to making communities safer around the globe can scarcely be measured," said David Maurstad, the head of the flood-insurance program at the [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#).

Dr. White's interests broadened to wider environmental hazards and social issues. In a speech in 1952 at Haverford College, he urged nations to engage economic development and conservation in programs, but not just through big projects.

"The tide of poverty will be turned only by the concurrent development of a vast number of small-scale projects centering upon the patient, simple action of workers in rural communities of Asia, the Middle East and Latin America," he said. "Perhaps we may envisage a new kind of army, a peace force, of young people recruited and trained under international direction for the task of building healthy and prosperous communities."

The first director of the [Peace Corps](#), R. Sargent Shriver, invited Dr. White to join the effort, but he declined, as he did all invitations to work directly for the government after service in the New Deal. Dr. White's biographer, Robert Hinshaw, has said he was reluctant to be required to base his decisions on government policies instead of his own principles.

Dr. White's son, William D. White, director of the Sloan program in health administration at [Cornell](#) and a professor in the Cornell department of policy analysis and management, said his father had proved masterly at getting people together and forging agreement. Mr. White said his father's views were deeply rooted in his Quaker faith, which also led him to be a conscientious objector in World War II.

As an alternative to military service in the war, Dr. White joined the American Friends Service Committee and aided refugees in France. He was captured in 1943 and was a prisoner of war in Baden-Baden, Germany, until 1944, when he was allowed to return to

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the United States.

From 1963 to 1969, he was chairman of the American Friends Service Committee.

Gilbert Fowler White was born on Nov. 26, 1911, in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago. He received undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Chicago. A former president of Haverford — named to the post at age 34 — he went on to teach at the University of Chicago and the University of Colorado, where he founded the Natural Hazards Research Center. Dr. White was executive editor of Environment magazine from 1983 to 1992 and worked in the late 90's to bring together Middle East nations to collaborate on developing and conserving water resources.

His work earned many honors, including the National Medal of Science, which he received in 2000, and the [National Geographic Society's](#) highest award, the Hubbard Medal. His long list of publications can be found at <http://www.colorado.edu/hazards/gfw/>.

Along with his son, also surviving are his second wife, Claire Sheridan; two children, Mary, of Boulder, and Frances Chapin of Edmonds, Wash.; two stepchildren, Monika Proffitt of Seattle and Daniel Proffitt of Boulder; and four grandchildren. His first wife, Anne Elizabeth Underwood, died in 1989.

Robert Kates, a geographer and professor emeritus at [Brown University](#) who was Dr. White's student and then a co-author, said his central insight — that big engineering efforts to repair environmental problems do not always work “and, in many cases, make the problem worse” — is just as important today.

“The basic problem is how to get people off the flood plain,” he said. “And after all these years, here we are with Katrina.”

Dr. White was uncommonly self-effacing, Dr. Kates noted. The two men attended a talk on managing flood plains by an official of the [Army Corps of Engineers](#) in the early 60's, and Dr. Kates noticed that the speech could have been drawn from Dr. White's own work.

“Gilbert,” Dr. Kates recalled whispering to his friend, “he's quoting you, but he never cites you!”

His mentor, Dr. Kates added, “turned and smiled, and said, ‘Yes, isn't it wonderful?’ ”

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