

## **Jungle scientist to urban warrior**

<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/8699951/dr-david-denham-passionate-scientist-and-community-advocate/>

By Malcolm Robertson

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**Dr David Denham, AM**

**21 March 1937 - 22 June 2024**

The tropical jungles of Papua New Guinea are no place for the faint-hearted.

They are hot, steamy and inhabited by all manner of strange creatures.

But into these jungles in 1965 Dr David Denham AM, who has died aged 87, willingly threw himself.



David Denham stands on Franklin Street, Manuka in his role as president of the Griffith Narrabundah Community Association. Picture by Jamila Toderas

In 1964, David, a recent geophysics PhD graduate from Leeds University in the UK, had been recruited by Australia's Bureau of Mineral Resources (BMR), now Geoscience Australia, to join the Bureau's legendary Observatory Group to take over the observer-in-charge position at the Port Moresby Geophysical Observatory.

In addition to this leadership role, David was also charged with expanding the network of seismographs, essential for monitoring and studying volcanic activity in this highly

earthquake-prone part of the world, from the one then currently operating in Port Moresby, to an array of twelve, particularly sited to assist monitoring the active volcano near Rabaul.

During the 1960s, the bureau was to lose one geophysicist to this active volcano. Installing seismographs was not only physically hard work, it was also dangerous.

Over the next five years, David built up the seismograph network in PNG and with his naturally inquisitive mind became increasingly interested in plate tectonics, then a relatively new field of interest.

PNG is geographically placed at the junction of several tectonic plates and whether you were interested in them or not, their movements were part of life in New Guinea with massive earthquakes, landslips and volcanic eruptions regular occurrences.

David grew up in Beverley in East Riding, Yorkshire, where his father Leonard Denham was a shopkeeper and his mother Edith (nee Leason) worked part time in the shop.

David was an only child. When war was declared in 1939, his father joined the Airforce and was away for most of David's primary school years.

A naturally clever child, David won a scholarship to Beverley Grammar School where he completed his secondary education, and a scholarship to Leeds University where he studied physics before embarking on his PhD.

Along with many citizens, David was particularly concerned about protecting the area's heritage and open spaces.

David met his wife Patricia (nee Malone) at university where she was studying education. In 1959, when she had finished her studies, they were married.

By the time they emigrated to Australia in 1964, their two children, first Rachel and then Angus, had been born.

David and his young family returned to the BMR in Canberra in 1970 where he was responsible for the BMR's seismic network and worked to bring together seismology work in universities and state government to establish a national earthquake database.

He organised several national earthquake symposia.

In 1986, he became head of the Australian Seismological Centre responsible for earthquake and nuclear monitoring, and then Chief of the Geophysics Division and assistant Director of BMR in 1988.

David Denham was one of the most energetic and respected earth scientists in Australia.

He was the founding Chair of the Geological Society of Australia's Specialist Group on Solid Earth Geophysics and he authored or coauthored over 40 publications on crustal structure, tectonics and earthquake risk.



David Denham, pictured with John Edquist, helped map open spaces in the ACT to draw attention to the loss of space in Canberra.

From 1976 to 1981 he wrote the 'Science in Government' column in *Search*, the monthly magazine of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS).

He used the column to critique government science policy, both good and bad.

David's efforts on behalf of Australian science, and in particular seismology, were acknowledged in the 1985 Australia Day Honours when he was made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM).

When David retired in 1999, he was Chief of the Minerals Division of BMR's successor organisation, AGSO, the Australian Geological Survey Organisation, but he wasn't through with critiquing government.

One of his great geoscience roles after his retirement was his Canberra Observed column in the Australian Society of Exploration Geophysicists' magazine *Preview*.

In this role he gained journalist status with the National Press Club and he was a regular questioner of speakers (usually federal politicians) at the Press Club's televised luncheon events.

He loved probing politicians on all matters relating to government science policy and the public funding of science.

After 25 years' association with *Preview*, his last column was published in April 2024.

### **Passionate community focus**

Although initially residents of Hughes, the Denhams had moved to Griffith in 1997 where David became increasingly alarmed at what he perceived as the slow erosion of planning process in the ACT, the ability of lessees to flagrantly ignore the "rules", and the increasing influence of developers with deep pockets.

Projects were going ahead in the leafy residential streets which were clearly against the spirit, if not the technical chapter and verse, of the ACT's planning legislation. Along with many citizens, he was particularly concerned about protecting the area's heritage and open spaces.

At the time of his death, David was president of the Griffith Narrabundah Community Association (GNCA) and represented the association on the Inner South Community Council.

He joined the association soon after his retirement from Geoscience Australia and soon became its public face as well as working behind the scenes to develop strategies for both bodies.

David also had a love of golf, a passion he said came via his father.

David played regularly in the Sunday Competition at Royal Canberra until health problems stopped him from playing recently. He was an excellent golfing partner - always bubbling with enthusiasm and energy, even when his shots didn't quite do what they were supposed to do.

David had always been a community-minded individual and throughout his life had taken on roles and activities that brought people together or encouraged group activities for the common good.

He was a regular correspondent in the letters pages of *The Canberra Times* and other journals, using his intelligence and wit to call out issues as he saw them in well-argued prose.

He continued to use this capability with the GNCA as it strived to protect urban open spaces and rein in the excesses of neighbourhood development.

David was also a friend of the National Portrait Gallery, a member of the Commonwealth Club and a regular participant in several walking groups. He was an ambassador of the National Arboretum Canberra which had very similar values to his own in conservation, scientific research, education, art, technology and protecting the environment.

Dr David Denham AM is survived by his wife Patricia, his two children Rachel and Angus and four grandchildren.

By Malcolm Robertson