

BIOLOGY

E.O. Wilson Sick and Tired of Ants



J.E.O. Wilson

In a move that has sent shockwaves through Harvard's academic community, legendary entomologist Edward Wilson has declared his relationship with ants to be officially over, OEB departmental sources confirmed Tuesday. "I am sick and tired of those goddamned little things," he wrote in a memo posted Saturday on the OEB departmental website.

"Edward has decided that the time is ripe to move on to bigger and better opportunities, and for the foreseeable future will sever his ties with the greater ant community," said departmental spokesman Donald Baylor during an hour long press conference in the Museum of Natural History. "From now on, Professor Emeritus Wilson intends to spend his time studying the foraging patterns of elephants - from a safe distance, he assures us," he said.

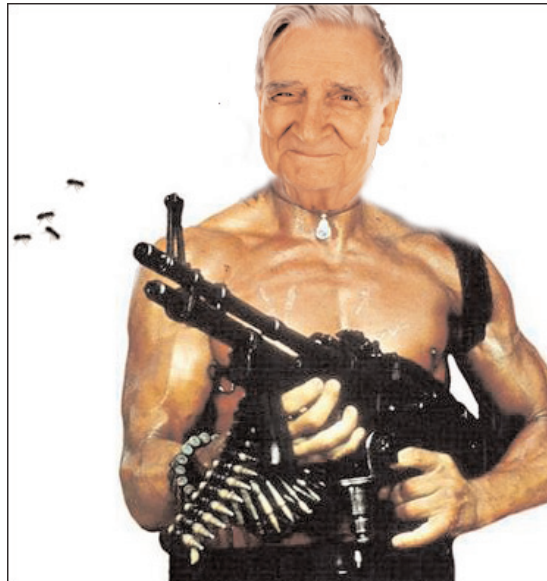
Sources close to Wilson, who declined to be identified, said that they could sympathize with his decision, noting that his ant career has lasted decades. "Ed just can't bear the thought of even another minute studying those little bugs," said one colleague at Berkeley. "And who can blame him? They work tirelessly for no reward, they can barely see, and let's not forget that they are tiny as hell. They run around carrying grubs for God's sake."

Wilson caused a stir earlier this year when he attended the National Conference on Elephant Anatomy, and proceeded to ask panelists where they were hiding the elephants' other pair of legs. According to conference sources, he then demanded to know "what that thingamabob attached to the elephant's mouthparts" was doing there. But Wilson reserved his harshest criticism for the panelists' denial that elephant feet were evolutionary adaptations specifically "for crushing as many ants as possible."

Although the announcement may come as a surprise

to most of his colleagues, there were warning signs that Wilson might be fed up with his ant research, according to Stanford University professor Deborah Gordon. Early in 2004 during an ant conference, she recalls that he interrupted the conference proceedings to curse every known species of ant, and their progeny unto the third generation. "His eyes wide, he shouted out his innumerable complaints about ants, about how they make his skin crawl, and his nose itch, and how it stings when fire ants bite, and how his sandwich was devoured by a horde of 'these little monsters' only hours earlier," said Gordon.

"I had to throw myself in front of our demonstration colony to prevent Edward - insensitive, intolerant, Southern, and brandishing insecticide - from eradicating my precious little darlings," said Gordon's graduate student Jessica Shors. When Wilson attempted to use his shoes to smash the ants, security intervened, she said.



Students in Harvard's OEB department had noticed erratic behavior as well. "Suddenly, he seemed to have taken to walking anteaters on leashes early in the morning," noted third year graduate student Angie Berg, who said that she regularly passed him on the way to work. And at the 2005 departmental Christmas party, he brought not his usual fare, but instead baked "ant cookies, ant brownies, ant brittles, and ant popsicles," according to Matt Hegreness, a graduate student in the Hartl laboratory.

News of Wilson's departure from ant entomology comes on the heels of his recent disclosure that he had an improper relationship with a subordinate harvester ant during the summer of 2001. Wilson, who maintains that his relationship with the ant was "consensual," was not immediately available for comment.

Upon release of Wilson's announcement, ant stocks fell 0.8% on the New York Stock Exchange. Wilson's secretary did not return phone calls, and emails sent to his laboratory were not immediately returned.

