In Memoriam:
Eugene Odum
“The Father of Modern Ecology” at UGA,
Dies at 88

ATHENS, Ga.– Eugene P. Odum, 88, director emeritus of the University of Georgia Institute of Ecology and recognized worldwide as “the father of modern ecology,” died Saturday at his Athens home.

Odum was born September 17, 1913. He grew up in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where his father, Howard W. Odum, was a professor of sociology. Odum’s brother, named Howard after their father, was born in 1920 and was to become a noted ecologist as well.

Odum showed a deep interest in birds as a teenager in Chapel Hill and with a friend named Coit Coker began a column called “Bird Life in Chapel Hill” in the local newspaper in the spring of 1931. When Odum graduated from high school in 1929, his class presented him with a comb because his wind-blown hair was never neat.

He received his bachelor’s and master’s from the University of North Carolina in and spent one formative summer as at the Allegheny School of Natural History. His first faculty post was in the department of biology at Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. In 1937, he entered the University of Illinois to work on his doctoral degree.

After graduation, he took a job as a resident naturalist for the Hyuck Preserve in upstate New York. He also married Martha Ann Huff, to whom he was married until her death in 1995. While at the Hyuck Preserve, Odum began research on birds and their habitats, research that would led him to a greater understanding of how entire ecosystems work.

The more Odum thought about ecosystems, the more he was convinced that there should a way to study how one part affects another. Yet this was in a day when there were no computers. Only crude tools were available to understand how biological and physical systems interacted. And yet, with the single-minded determination that became the hallmark of his method, Odum set about creating a discipline that took a revolutionary view of how ecosystems worked.

In the fall of 1940, Odum took a full-time job as an instructor of zoology at the University of Georgia. He was the only ecologist in a department of five faculty members, none of whom thought much about his ideas of studying entire ecosystems. Before he could develop his ideas further, World War II exploded. Odum spent three years helping teach science to nurses, pharmacy-mates and pre-medical personnel. He even found time to coach the UGA tennis team.

In 1951, the Atomic Energy Commission made a decision that would have a profound effect on Odum’s career and the future of ecology. The AEC had earlier built the Savannah River Site on land in South Carolina just across the line from Georgia. To see if the site had any effect on nearby plants and animals,