September 24, 2012

To the ATBC Executive Committee:

It gives us great pleasure to nominate Robin B. Foster for the 2013 ATBC Honorary Fellow award. Robin has made enormous contributions to both tropical biology and conservation over his career, inspiring major advances in tropical ecology; mentoring hundreds of students from all over the world; playing a leading role in the protection of tropical forests through his work in rapid biological inventories; and bringing tropical biology to the masses with his efforts to digitize herbarium specimens and produce rapid color field guides of tropical flora and fauna.

Robin's first major contributions to tropical biology began with his work on Barro Colorado Island (BCI) in Panama. Due to his insistence that progress in community ecology depended on accurately identifying the species involved, Robin spent an enormous time to exhaustively catalogue the flora at BCI in order to gain insight into the ecological processes that were driving dynamic patterns in the entire community. This lead to the creation of the first 50-ha tropical dynamics plot, which has since transformed the whole field of ecology, spurring new approaches to research on dispersal limitation, density-dependence, gap dynamics and even inspiring whole new theories such as the Unified Neutral Theory of Biodiversity and Biogeography. The establishment and re-census of this first forest dynamics plot was a new way to study tropical forests' spatial and temporal dynamics, and we now have 47 such plots in 21 countries with more than 8 million trees mapped and monitored. It is without a doubt that Robin's vision has transformed the way we ask questions in tropical ecology.

Robin generosity with his tropical plant wisdom is legendary. He is always teaching others, pointing out new species, ideas for projects, and insights about tropical forests. Robin has formally mentored several Master's and Ph.D. students but has participated in teaching and mentoring many hundreds of young biologists over the last forty years, especially in Latin American countries. Robin has brought dozens of international students to Chicago to work with him and train in the herbarium. He is a walking definition of "capacity builder" as he has worked in more than 10 different countries to run workshops, train students in plant identification, organize herbaria, mentor research projects, and produce materials for teaching among many other efforts. Dozens of international students that he has mentored have gone on to earn Ph.D.s and return to their home countries to be a leader in tropical biology and conservation. Robin also was an early OTS instructor and a leader in developing its curriculum. The fact that the 2013 ATBC meeting is also in Costa Rica is a highly appropriate place to bestow this honor on Robin. Finally, we would like to mention that Robin always goes out of his way to help students (even housing them on many occasions), remains connected to them, and takes considerable pride in their accomplishments for which he never takes any credit.

Robin invented what we now refer to as "rapid biological inventories" or RBIs. He began conducting these with Conservation International, and continues to this day to work on such projects with the Field Museum's Environmental and Conservation programs. Many of these locations were either previously unexplored by Western scientists, represent

unusual biological communities, and/or are threatened by development. As a result, these RBIs have been the basis for the creation of numerous national parks and protected areas in many different countries and, as a happy byproduct, have lead to the discovery and description of dozens of new plants and animal species. This inventory work always involves the participation of in-country students, scientists, local community members and stakeholders, which extends the RBIs considerable impact to social dimensions.

Robin has taken the dissemination of tropical plant knowledge as his life's work. His vision is that taxonomically accurate information on plants should be accessible to all. This work encompasses single-page laminated field guides to the plants of a particular park to whole compendia of digital images of herbarium specimens for a geographic region. While it is now commonplace that an herbarium provides online scanned specimens, Robin pioneered this – even before the internet – with his photo-copied high-quality scans of specimens ("the microherbaria"), and then also was the first to put herbarium scans online. Robin also innovated a new way to organize herbarium collections in his "Rapid Reference collection" to facilitate inventory work in specific regions. This has broadened the use of herbarium specimens beyond systematic revisions into ecological and conservation research. Along the way, he has single-handedly produced as well as facilitated others to create more than 500 different rapid color guides that are available free of charge on the Field Museum website. This often was a labor of love in addition to all of his other funded projects, and everyone in the tropical plant biology and conservation community is extremely grateful for this work. It is difficult to think of anyone else who has had a bigger impact on making plant taxonomic information so freely available.

In conclusion, Robin has made extraordinary contributions to our knowledge of tropical forest trees, with his encyclopedic knowledge of vegetative tree identification, his tireless explorations of remote sites, and his unparalleled observational powers of natural history. And perhaps more than anyone, he has inspired countless young biologists throughout North and South America to appreciate tropical forests and to study and conserve them. We, the undersigned, represent a few of the many biologists to whom Robin gave the confidence to venture into tropical forests and are forever grateful for his inspiration and guidance.

Thank you for your consideration of Robin for this prestigious award.

Sincerely,

Paul Fine, Margaret Metz, Lissy Coley, Kaoru Kitajima, Nancy Garwood, Corine Vrisendorp, Rick Condit, Steve Hubbell, Lourens Poorter, Lúcia Lohmann, Marielos Peña