

John Russell Mather



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Charles P. Daly Medal recognizes UD geographer

The name of **John Russell Mather**, professor emeritus of geography at the University of Delaware, has been added to the list of recipients of the prestigious Charles P. Daly Medal, awarded every few years by the American Geographical Society (AGS). Not bad, considering previous winners have included the likes of Robert E. Peary and Raold Amundsen, the first men to set foot on the North and South Poles, respectively. Peary won the award in 1902 and Amundsen received it in 1912.

"Sure, everyone knows the explorers but there are lots of geographers on the list, too," Mather said with a laugh, "including Carl Sauer and Gilbert White."

Established in 1902 by the will of Judge Daly, president of the American Geographical Society from 1864-1899, the award is one of the most distinguished in the field of geography.

The program from the presentation ceremony, held last month in New York City, heralds Mather's "remarkable career in geography that [includes] five decades of outstanding teaching, research and service."

The award citation for Mather reads, "This honoree, while achieving excellence as a physical geographer, has devoted his career to subjects of universal interest to all geographers and has applied them in the service of his country...he has received many honors for this richly textured life of working for the benefit of others and for the benefit of our planet Earth.

"It has been said of [Mather] that in all his roles he listens carefully, misses nothing, speaks rarely and makes a difference when he does. He has been a rock in hard times, a source of encouragement and good sense in moments of volatility and a friend always. He is widely admired for the low-key, self-deprecating style that is so quietly effective when it counts," the award citation reads.

"For 50 years, he has been in the classroom, teaching generations of fortunate students. For 24 years, he served as chair of his Department of Geography. For 45 years, he has carried out climate and soil analysis for the research offices of the U.S. Army, Air Force and Navy and for state and federal agencies. For 13 years, he served as state climatologist for the state of Delaware. For half a century, he has been a diligent and careful consensus builder as a member of some 45 professional and scholarly committees within almost as many professional and scholarly associations."

Born in Boston in 1923, Mather earned his bachelor's degree in history from Williams College. He received a second bachelor's degree and a master's degree, both in meteorology, from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1947-48.

He began his professional career as a research associate and climatologist at the Johns Hopkins University Laboratory of Climatology. He also taught in the geography-climatology program at Johns Hopkins and earned his doctorate from the program in 1951.

He worked as an assistant professor at Johns Hopkins and an adjunct associate professor at the Drexel Institute of Technology from 1957-1961. He came to UD in 1961 and was promoted to full professor in 1963. From 1966 until 1989 he chaired the Department of Geography.

During his years at UD, Mather taught more than 12,000 students and supervised 18 doctoral and 30 master's degree candidates.

Before coming to UD, Mather spent time at the Laboratory of Climatology at Seabrook, N.J., working under the tutelage of Warren Thornthwaite. When Thornthwaite died in 1963, Mather became president and director of the C.W. Thornthwaite Laboratory of Climatology, a position he held until 1972.

Mather has been involved in research in the areas of micrometeorology, evapotranspiration, soil moisture and other aspects of hydroclimatology. He also conducted early studies of natural hazards-especially coastal storm hazards-and the movement of radioactive strontium through soil. Ultimately, he produced more than 100 articles and five books.

At UD, he investigated topics as diverse as water budgets, landfill management, drought warning and climate and society. His articles appeared in the leading journals of many disciplines, including geography, meteorology, agricultural engineering, anthropology and geophysics. His research was funded by numerous agencies including the U.S. Office of Water Research and Technology, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the U.S. Geological Survey, NASA and the Department of the Interior.

He served on committees for the American Geophysical Union, American Meteorological Society, National Academy of Science, National Research Foundation and the American Association of State Climatologists, among others.

Mather was elected a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1989, and has received the Commander Award for public service given by the U.S. Department of the Army. Most recently, the Association of American Geographers formally recognized his career with its Lifetime Achievement Award in 1998. At UD, he received an excellence in teaching award in 1989 and the Francis Alison Award, as an outstanding member of the faculty, in 1990.

-Beth Thomas