This spring, William Burch, Frederick C. Hixon Professor of Natural Resource Management, told a gathering of F&ES alumni that he had, during his career, tried to “carry out the words, if not the music, to the song ‘I did it my way!’”

Burch, who is retiring this year from Yale after 40 years on the faculty, was on hand to receive a distinguished service award, along with former Dean John Gordon and Robert Pyle, Ph.D. ’76. When it was time for him to give the keynote address to the alumni, Burch—never one to flinch from sharing his passion—offered remarks that have become his trademark: part instructional, part inspirational, all from the heart. He, in short, did it his way by presenting the talk “Back to the Future: Lessons From Pulaskis, Peaveys, Porcupine Sex and Maine Lupines.”

In it, he called himself “a preindustrial exchange scholar, whose rant is that society is nature and nature is social” and a professor at a fancy school who thinks that the most effective learning for natural resource professionals can only come through getting your hands dirty by being involved in activities useful to others.” He offered his audience advice such as: “always question authority—especially if you have now become one” and “meaning well or even being right seldom excuses a large failure done in public and with all the bright stage lights on.”

Burch has had few “large failures” in his career, though he has felt the bright lights on such stages as Nepal, Bhutan, China, Costa Rica, Argentina, Bolivia, Paraguay, India, Bangladesh, the Philippines and Peru, as well as the inner cities of the United States. At each stop, he has hammered home the one idea that has animated his research: “Urban areas are ecological systems, and humans should be studied from ecological and spatial perspectives.”

In other words, you can’t take the human out of the environment. “Environmental solutions can’t be outside the scale of daily human life,” he says. “The Cedar Hill neighborhood group in New Haven honored the work of our students from the Urban Resources Initiative and the ecosystem management class by planting a birch tree near the basketball court, making a connection between playing basketball and the natural world. This group, like many others in the city, has demonstrated that local people can take charge of their own environment. They just need modest resources, technical backup and some optimism that our students bring to such challenges.”

In addition to the classes he has taught at F&ES in forest management and urban ecology, Burch has also held social science research and management appointments with the U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service and Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection. His work on wildland recreation behavior was among the earliest, and expanded to include parks, biosphere reserves and
ecotourist regions in Asia, South America and Europe.

He was the first director of Yale's Tropical Resources Institute and the Urban Resources Initiative. He has been a grantee on numerous projects—sponsored by USAID, the Ford Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation and the World Wildlife Fund—in Asia and Latin America. He was awarded the John Eadie Fellowship by the Scottish Forestry Trust to advise British Forestry on community-based forestry research and training needs. And since 2001, he has been an adjunct professor in the School of Economics and Management at Beijing Forestry University.

"The best class I ever took was his six-credit monster on managing protected areas," says Marc Stern '92, Ph.D. '06, whose advisor was Burch. "I was hesitant to take it, because I just wanted to be away from people in a forest, studying the ecosystem. But he convinced me that local studies in New Haven were just as fascinating as forests in Nepal—that it didn't matter where you are, New Haven or Nepal; the same theories and realities applied. His message has always been that unless you can reach to that village level, it won't work. We can think up brilliant ideas and theories and plans, but it makes no difference if they don't reach ordinary people."

Graeme Berlyn, E. H. Harriman Professor of Forest Management, is the longest-serving member of the F&ES faculty, in his 48th year. "Even though he used to jokingly say his expertise was 'the sociology of leisure,' Bill got so many things done. He deepened and broadened the school, but his biggest gift to his students may be his broadening of their imaginations. I'm terribly sad to see him go."

For Stern and his wife, Kim Thurlow '02, Burch wasn't just a teacher; he took a paternal interest in their lives. Burch flew to speak at their wedding despite being weak from a bout of dysentery.

Equally memorable was the conference on rainforest protection that Stern organized at the school and at which Burch was the keynote speaker.

"People had been pontificating all day about various forest issues," recalls Stern. "Bill got up in his torn jeans, tweed coat and cowboy belt buckle and slammed his fist on the podium. He was angry, telling the crowd 'You are arguing over tiny things. What you're forgetting about ... is love.' Then he cited a Puccini opera to make a point that 'every time we lose a species we cry together.' By the time he was through, there were people weeping in the audience behind me."

When asked later about the talk, Burch laughs and says, "It was the usual stuff, people talking in grandiose ways, not connecting to the assumed clients—the villagers in Guatemala or whomever. Not asking, 'What do they need? How do they perceive the problem?' I sensed an unwillingness to get down and find out for themselves."


"The hall was filled to a fault and accessible to an extreme, Burch is also given to solitary wanderings in the forest. Tireless in his dedication to his job, he is equally devoted to his family, and his Branford home was open to F&ES students over the years. 'Bill had students from all over the world and treated them as an extended family,' notes Machlis.

His worldview was shaped during a boyhood in eastern Oregon, when his father, then employed by the Depression-era Works Progress Administration, took the family on extended camping trips. "It was a good childhood," he says. "My brother and I grew up out of a tent."

While attending college at the University of Oregon, Burch could not resist getting involved in the trade union movement and found himself at the center of a campus workers' strike. Later, working for the U.S. Forest Service, he struggled with like-minded scientists to save the virgin forests from timbering and dam building before the Wilderness Act was passed in September 1964. The act protected 9 million acres of federal land and created the legal definition of wilderness: "an

continued on page 61
area where the Earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”

Burch fondly recalls how he was, at that time, part of a “coalition of nature lovers, pacifists and workers’ rights activists.”

“We had diversity before anyone even knew what the term meant,” he says. “Even though the unity fell apart in the late 1960s, I still think that three-legged paradigm of nature-peace-labor was a good one and will return to the fore.”

After his time with the Forest Service, Burch taught at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand and Syracuse University, before hearing about what he called “interesting developments” at Yale.

“The Yale Forestry School was looking for noneconomist social scientists,” he recalls. “That’s when Francois Mergen was dean. He knew that changes had to be made to broaden the forestry school, so he brought in Herb Bormann, Rick Miller and me.”

Burch went on to author, co-author or edit 14 books on community development, natural resources and the environment, as well as 100 peer-reviewed journal articles. “The great benefit at Yale is that I didn’t have to do esoteric, peer academic work,” he says. “I could do other work.”

Among this “other work” was the reorganization of the state’s environmental protection department. In addition to the state government work, Burch was retained by the National Park Service as a researcher from 1984 to 1996. As such, he’s left his mark around the country and the world.

Machlis took such teachings to heart.

“Bill emboldened me in my research by instilling in me that you don’t have to go toward conventional acclaim. It has been 30 years and even though I am now his colleague [Burch and Machlis are collaborating on a book to be published in 2009 by Yale University Press,], I am still his student. I bought a place on Vieques, Puerto Rico, near his place just to keep learning from him. In my 35 years in academia, he is the one intellectual who is most capable of continued learning. Bill is the exemplar of lifelong learning.”

A tribute to Tom Siccama will appear in the spring 2009 issue.