Dr. D. James Baker

The George Davidson Medal

for research in the Pacific area

Today we honor D. James Baker with the George Davidson Medal. This medal, established in 1946, was to honor Davidson, a towering figure in oceanic research. During his career, spanning the years 1845-1911, he improved navigational instruments, led ambitious oceanic expeditions, and established new programs. His time out on the water off the coast of California and the Pacific Northwest improved the knowledge and maps of the coastal contours in ways that kept countless seagoers from harm. He went on to found the University of California Geography program and from there worked constantly and constructively to improve geographical knowledge across academia, government, and business.

Baker, too, is a towering figure. He also developed new oceangraphic techniques, has done pathbreaking research, and created and run important institutions. He has pushed into new areas, generating better knowledge, and widened the public's understanding of the oceans, climate, and earth systems. Baker's contributions are as distinguished by their scientific brilliance as by their social and institutional importance.

Early in his career at Harvard, he discovered a new oceanic fluid instability. With A.R. Robinson, he made the first laboratory model of the equatorial ocean circulation, and developed and patented a new deep-sea pressure gauge. He later served as president of the Joint Oceanographic Institutions where he managed its International Ocean Drilling Program and guided new programs in satellite oceanography. He co-founded The Oceanography Society and was its first president.

Appointed Under Secretary of Commerce and Administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) by President William Clinton, he is the longest serving administrator of NOAA, an achievement that speaks to his ability to work with complex science, politics, and bureaucracy to get things done. He guided the modernization of the National Weather Service, started new climate forecasting services; and merged the civil and military environmental satellite systems. He put in place much of the infrastructure essential to gather the information needed to manage the risks of climate change. He dramatically increased funding for fisheries and coastal zone management, updated and expanded mapping and charting of the nation's coastal waters. He co-chaired the President's Global Disaster Information Network Council and the Committee on Environment and Natural Resources and served on the President's Council on Sustainable Development. As the U.S. Commissioner to the International Whaling Commission he led the efforts to establish in the Southern Ocean the largest whale sanctuary ever put in place. He was the co-chair of the Environmental Working Group of the U.S./Russia Binational Commission that led to the first release of classified Russian environmental data.

After NOAA, Baker became President and CEO of the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia where he established new research programs and created a popular Town Square public forum to discuss topics like sustainability and global warming. He joined the Clinton Foundation as senior strategic advisor for the Climate Initiative, with special attention to developing countries' forestry programs. He has worked to create open-source tools for monitor resource use, reduce carbon dioxide emissions while alleviating poverty.
Baker's qualities of mind and character have given him a major role in preparing us to face the ongoing and rising threats to the planet.

Therefore, for these reasons and more, on behalf of its grateful members, worldwide scholars, and all who recognize the importance of excellence in geographical research and exploration, The American Geographical Society honors Dr. D. James Baker by presenting him with the George Davidson Medal on this the 17th day of November in the year 2023 in New York City.