Stuart Altmann was born in St. Louis, Missouri and grew up in Los Angeles, California. He was both a scientist and an artist, working as a biologist for his professional life and pursuing ceramics expertly as an avocation.

His formal scientific training began at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where he first completed a Bachelor's degree and then a Master's degree in Biology in 1953. He studied under George Bartholomew, researching the mobbing behavior of birds. He was drafted into the Army and served from 1954 to 1956 as a research scientist at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

At the end of his army service, he hitched a ride to Panama on army transport planes and used his carefully accumulated leave time to study the Barro Colorado howler monkeys, publishing a paper that is still cited today for its descriptions of primate vocalizations. He attended Harvard University between 1956 and 1960 as E. O. Wilson's first Ph.D. student, adopting a decidedly sociobiological perspective that he and Wilson developed in extensive conversations comparing primates and social insects. He conducted his Ph.D. research on the rhesus macaques on Cayo Santiago in Puerto Rico, while he was revitalizing and managing the colony under the sponsorship of W. F. Windle at the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

This research, motivated by his interest in communication, produced a series of papers between 1962 and 1968 that represent a seminal contribution to primate behavioral ecology. The first of these analyzed reproductive behavior; it is still commonly cited in the twenty-first century, and Altmann’s “priority of access” model has greatly influenced subsequent work on the relationship between dominance rank and mating success in male mammals.

What set Altmann apart from his peers was his ability to frame problems conceptually, use mathematical models to make strong predictions and then draw on his natural history insights and systematic observations to test them. What emerged was a new way of thinking and framing of behavioral questions. His quantitative approach transformed the study of primate behavior. In addition, in an era when interest in behavior as an adaptation was burgeoning, Altmann set high standards for a very detailed understanding of the functional consequences of behaviors such as foraging, and of how we evaluate adaptation in nature.
In the summer of 1958, he met his future wife Jeanne when they were both working for the NIH, and they married in 1959. He began his first faculty position at the University of Alberta in 1960, and moved to Yerkes National Primate Research Center in 1965. In 1970, he moved to a joint appointment in the Biology Department (which later became the Department of Ecology and Evolution) and the Anatomy Department at the University of Chicago. He became Emeritus Professor at University of Chicago in 1995, and beginning in 1998 was a Senior Lecturer at rank of Professor in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at Princeton University.

In 1963–64, Stuart and Jeanne Altmann made their first trip to what was then the Amboseli-Maasai Game Reserve, later Amboseli National Park, in southern Kenya, to study the Amboseli baboons. They returned to Amboseli for short trips in 1969 and 1970. In 1971, they returned again, and began collecting the longitudinal data on the Amboseli baboon population that is still being collected today. The establishment of the Amboseli research site proved to be a foundational contribution to the study of primates. The research at this site continues to provide new knowledge and insights about primate behavior and
evolution, 54 years after Stuart and Jeanne arrived in Amboseli and 46 years after the establishment of the long-term research.

Stuart was a mentor and friend to us and to many others. Through both his science and his art, he influenced so many lives in complex, unexpected, and remarkable ways. He is deeply missed, and will always be with us in spirit.

A selection of Stuart Altmann’s publications


