



Former President of International Council for Bird Preservation and Audubon dies

Title

"The world has lost a champion for the environment," Audubon President, David Yarnold said at Audubon headquarters in New York. "Russ Peterson distinguished himself as president of the National Audubon Society from 1979-1985. Throughout the country Audubon staffers join me in recalling his visionary contributions, and the extraordinary example he set."

Yarnold, now a successor to Russell W. Peterson as the society's president, reflected a sentiment common among environmentalists and politicians. Those familiar with Peterson's record remember him as one of the most outspoken and influential defenders of the planet's natural resources during the last third of the twentieth century. As an industry executive and a Republican governor of Delaware, he often battled against powerful leaders in his own camp to protect land, water, and wildlife.

That battle continued during Peterson's Audubon tenure in the early 1980s, when the Reagan administration brought to power James Watt as Secretary of the Interior. Watt led a determined assault on most of the environmental gains America had put into place with effective laws and policies. Peterson became an implacable foe of the attempts to dismantle environmental protections, and continued the struggle long after his departure from Audubon. As recently as last October, he appeared at the Audubon Medal Dinner in Greenwich, CT in a wheelchair, where a long-time colleague described him "as engaged and inspired as ever."

But Peterson will be remembered for more than his reputation as a warrior. He made a number of innovations at Audubon, among them "The World of Audubon" film series, which he launched with the aid of Ted Turner. Prominent Hollywood stars, including Robert Redford and Jane Fonda, narrated those films that promoted wildlife conservation.

"Russ launched the Audubon Adventures program for elementary school children that is still going," recalls Glenn Olson, a member of the Audubon team when Peterson became president and now is the society's Donald O'Brien Chair in Bird Conservation. "And he took on James Watt by organizing the Citizens' Mobilization Campaign that Audubon hosted

around the country to alert people about what Watt and others were trying to do.?

Peterson came to conservation by a roundabout route. A native of Wisconsin and a chemist by profession, he climbed the corporate ladder at the DuPont Company in Delaware to become director of its research and development division. He made the switch to politics and, as a prominent Republican, became governor of Delaware in 1969.

There he cultivated a mild interest in bird watching into a broad command of environmental issues. He fought a giant expansion plan along the Delaware coast by the Shell Oil Company (Peterson's lapel button "To Hell With Shell" became a watchword in the state) and declared a moratorium on coastal development. The passage of the Delaware Coastal Zone Act under his leadership gave a vital lift to conservationists all over the country at a time when there was great public concern about the loss of coastal wetlands to development.

During the Nixon-Ford years in Washington, Peterson served as chairman of the President's Council on Environmental Quality. He received the Audubon Medal for outstanding service to conservation in 1977. When the society tapped him for its top post, he was director of the Office of Technology Assessment for Congress and he became Audubon president in 1979.

As Audubon president, Peterson led the society under the banner "Think Globally, Act Locally." His interests lay chiefly in some of the overriding issues of our time—the threats to the global environment posed by nuclear arms, human population growth, the lack of strong national energy policies, and pollution from toxic materials. He took an active personal role in many international societies and conferences and served as president of the International Council for Bird Preservation (now BirdLife International). But his global programs were restricted by the demands of fighting off threats to the American environment from the forces led by James Watt and his admirers in Washington.

Peterson cut short his Audubon presidency in 1985 to become a "more effective" one-world? activist.? He would spend what he called his next career writing and speaking, "catalyzing action toward reducing threats to all plants and animal life.?"

When Peterson died at 94 this week, Delaware's senior United States Senator Tom Carper attested to his success in that sphere. "At an age when most people are ready to push back and take life easy, Russ Peterson just kept picking up speed," Carper said. "What a giant. God knows I'll miss him. We all will.?"

by Frank Graham, *Audubon* magazine's longtime field editor