

Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame



George C. Becker
Inducted 2010



“From Lac Vieux Desert to Prairie du Chien, this great Wisconsin River must become a model of cleanliness.”

–George C. Becker

Facts About George C. Becker

Author of “Fishes of Wisconsin”

Developed system to pinpoint age and growth of fish

Tireless advocate for Wisconsin River cleanup

Opposed DNR chemical treatment of streams

Mentored students as professor of biology

George C. Becker 1917-2002

A blend of scientist, teacher, author and activist (he was also an accomplished musician), George C. Becker left a rich conservation legacy.

Wisconsin’s rivers and streams and the web of life they support were direct beneficiaries of the work of this talented and, at times fiery, defender of the environment.

Born in 1917 in Milwaukee, he studied both the sciences and languages, served in the Army Signal Corps in World War II and taught and worked in administration at several Wisconsin high schools. He also earned master’s degrees in German philology and science (zoology and botany) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he later earned his Ph.D. In 1957, he joined the biology faculty at the state college in Stevens Point, now the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He remained on the faculty for more than two decades, where he was the university’s chief expert on fishes.

Becker authored the massive “Fishes of Wisconsin,” a 1,052-page volume that covered 157 fish species. Published in 1983, it was the first of its kind in the state and one of the first such comprehensive works in the nation. Work on “Fishes of Wisconsin” began almost immediately upon his arrival in Stevens Point. There was no research money available, so the effort became a family affair, with wife, Sylvia, and sons Kenneth, Dale and David joining him on fish seining outings across the state. Writing of the book took three years, and the result was a work that detailed the status, distribution, habitat and biology of the state’s fish species. He enlivened it with anecdotes and even a few fishing tips, overcoming the objections of the publisher, and making it readable for fishers and scholars alike.

His scientific accomplishments also included developing a system to pinpoint the age and growth of fish by concentrating on growth rings in scales.

(Continued on back page)

**About Wisconsin's
Conservation Hall of Fame**
www.wchf.org

Location:

Schmeeckle Reserve
Stevens Point, Wis.

Attractions:

Displays, information on Wisconsin's conservation history and leaders. Schmeeckle Reserve, owned by the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, provides hiking and wildlife viewing opportunities.

Purpose:

To educate and inspire people with information about how resource conservation has shaped our environment and our lives.

Hours:

M-F, 9 a.m. - 4 p.m.
Sat: Noon - 4 p.m.
Sun: Noon - 4 p.m.

Support:

The Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame is funded solely by contributions. Donations are tax deductible and may be sent to:

WCHF Foundation Inc.
Schmeeckle Reserve
UW-Stevens Point
Stevens Point, WI 54481
715-346-4992

Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame
Honoring our state's rich conservation history

George Becker

(continued)

He was among the first to demand a cleanup of the Wisconsin River, which was polluted by industrial and municipal dischargers. He took up the cause in the 1960s, when politicians, civic and business leaders opposed it as too costly. "The river was brown and lacked its former clarity. It had a terrible odor. Massive fish kills were occurring, including a remnant sturgeon population. We were turning the river into a sewer, and I knew something had to be done," he wrote in an essay.

As president of the Citizens Natural Resources Association of Wisconsin from 1972-74, he interested fellow members in the issue, leading to creation of the Wisconsin River Restoration Committee, which he chaired. He proposed a sanitary authority for the entire river valley. He was mocked for proposing an effort of this scale, but continued to lobby for a cleanup.

The Restoration Committee raised funds to advocate its cause, testified at hearings, submitted numerous resolutions and petitions to various branches of government and published a report asking the U.S. attorney for the western district of Wisconsin to take action against polluters. The federal Clean Water Act of 1972 spurred river cleanup, and Becker later wrote, "...everybody I talk to now says the Wisconsin River is in its best shape in memory."

Becker tangled with the Department of Natural Resources over the agency's plan to chemically treat the Tomorrow-Waupaca River basin to eliminate rough fish and improve conditions for trout. He contended it was too drastic a solution and would wipe out rare species. He lost the battle, and the project was carried out, but in time the DNR stopped using the technique in streams.

Becker was also an outspoken opponent of unchecked population growth and fought the use of nuclear power for energy.

Among his many admirers is Mike Dombeck, a former student who was chief of the U.S. Forest Service from 1997-2001. "Immersed in Washington, D.C.'s political landscape, I often quietly wondered what George would do," Dombeck recalled. He often found out. "Even in his later years, he kept in touch," Dombeck said.