

# Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame



**Herbert F. Behnke**

Inducted 2009



“I never really listened much to special interest groups. To me, it was the common men and women who loved to hunt and fish, and what they wanted.”

— **Herb Behnke**

## Facts About Herb Behnke

Longest-serving member  
of Resources Board

Served as the voice of  
“common men and  
women” on the board

Strong supporter of state  
acquisition of significant  
lands

Encouraged efforts to de-  
velop long-term deer  
management policy

Balanced science with  
public’s needs

## Herbert F. Behnke Born 1925

The longest-serving member of Wisconsin’s Natural Resources Board earned respect in state conservation circles for positions he took on behalf of common folks. Herbert “Herb” Behnke was born on a Lena dairy farm, the youngest of 10 children. He never forgot those humble roots.

As a young man, he left the farm to work at Cooperative Resources International (CRI), a Shawano-based animal breeding business, where he rose to the position of vice president of marketing.

One of his first tastes of citizen engagement came in 1961, when Gov. Gaylord Nelson (Conservation Hall of Fame inductee) appointed him to the Wolf River Basin Regional Planning Commission. He carried knowledge gained from that service to the natural resources arena, especially in the areas of conservation and land use.

Behnke’s state natural resources service began when Gov. Warren Knowles (Conservation Hall of Fame inductee) appointed him to the Wisconsin Conservation Commission in 1967. When the state conservation and resource development agencies were merged to form the Department of Natural Resources in 1968, Knowles appointed Behnke to the newly formed Natural Resources Board. He served until 1972. He was appointed again by Thompson in 1989 and served until

2006. He chaired the board from 1993 to 1997.

Behnke counts his role of shepherding state land acquisitions among his top accomplishments. The DNR controlled 803,554 acres when Behnke was first appointed. By the time he left the board, that total had more than doubled.

The state’s Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program propelled land acquisitions during his tenure. “We acquired some great properties,” he said, citing the Chippewa, Flambeau and Willow flowages as examples. “Those things were all possible through the Stewardship Program, and if we hadn’t had those dollars, those lands would all be developed. I was involved in looking at those projects, in-

*(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

**Herbert F. Behnke**

*(continued)*

specting them and recommending them." One of the areas acquired by the state was the Wolf River Bottomlands near Shioc-ton. Acquisition of that area was a longtime interest of Behnke's, and the state named a management area on the land after him in 2006.

Wisconsin's deer management program has long been controversial. Behnke balanced his respect for the science of deer management with public input.

"He asked the DNR and Conservation Congress to work at developing a long-term solution, which was the Deer 2000 process, one of the largest public participation procedures in natural resources," recalled Madison writer and former DNR information and education employee Tim Eisele. "He always wanted to know the science behind DNR proposals and always believed that biological information had to be given heavy emphasis, but then the board had to take into consideration public views and make decisions."

Behnke also took pride in looking out for the interests of the state's hunting and fishing community. "I never really listened much to special interest groups. To me, it was the common men and women who loved to hunt and fish, and what they wanted. I believed in the science of wildlife management tempered with public input. We need to fit the public's interest into the science," he said.

He had an independent streak, too. He opposed making the DNR secretary a governor's appointee. That put him at odds with Gov. Tommy Thompson, who had appointed him and who engineered the change from a board-appointed secretary system.

At the time of his induction into the Conservation Hall of Fame, Behnke remained active in various conservation and civic causes, including serving on the board of the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin and several wildlife groups.

Tom Lyon, former chief executive officer at CRI and onetime president of the Wisconsin Board of Regents, had this to say about his longtime colleague:

"Herb Behnke did not have a stage like Professor Aldo Leopold or Senator Gaylord Nelson, but his longtime positive presence in the natural resource policy development arena may have been just as great."

Not bad for a farm kid from Lena.