



State loses dedicated conservationist, Dan Trainer

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Stevens Point, Wis. – Wisconsin lost a dedicated conservationist Dec. 8, when Dan Trainer Jr. passed away.

The 81-year-old retired dean of the College of Natural Resources at UW-Stevens Point had helped to begin wildlife disease studies at UW-Madison, and then moved north in 1971 to establish the Natural Resources College at UW-Stevens Point.

Christine Thomas, dean of the College of Natural Resources and chairman of the Natural Resources Board, said, “Dan Trainer was the right man at the right time for the College of Natural Resources.

He was an important leader who empowered the faculty to do what they do best.

“Dan was one of the most important people in my life,” Thomas said. “He had an ability to look inside you and know what you could do. More importantly, he had the ability to inspire you to do it.”

Trainer is largely responsible for “building” the program at UW-Stevens Point, which now turns out many graduates who go on to become fisheries and wildlife biologists and game wardens. He was inducted into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame in 2006.

Trainer was destined to work in the natural resources field, as his father, Dan Trainer Sr., worked as a game warden in Marquette and Green Lake counties for the former Wisconsin Conservation Department, retiring in 1950.

Trainer grew up in Princeton, receiving a bachelor’s degree at Ripon College and his Ph.D. in 1968 at UW-Madison. He retired from UW-Stevens Point as dean of the College of Natural Resources in 1990.

Last Trainer interview

“One of the reasons I came here was that Lee Dreyfus also had been on the faculty in Madison, and when he became chancellor at Stevens Point he asked me to head up the college,” Trainer said in an interview with this reporter two years ago. In the same interview, he said, “The program had lots of potential and I was very impressed with Dreyfus, who said he would make natural resources the mission of the university, which he did,” Trainer said. “He was as much responsible for making that college go as anyone.”

The college offered an undergraduate program in natural resources, which was not available at UW-Madison, and then started a conservation law enforcement major which was the first in the Midwest. Graduates could then be hired as conservation wardens.

“Besides being competent in textbook and technical knowledge, we wanted our kids to be trained in the field,” Trainer said. Students were required to attend summer camp to learn how to inventory fish and wildlife, and cruise timber in order to have an integrated approach.

“You can’t be in natural resources and be over-specialized,” Trainer said. “Students had hands-on field experience, and at the end of the camp they had 40 acres to study. They had to inventory it, including soil types, vegetation, water, wildlife, and draw up a plan. They had to know that everything was inter-related.”

Trainer credited the faculty for instilling the concept of interrelationships before he even arrived in Stevens Point.

“We took advantage of the resources we had around us,” he said. “At the peak we had more than 2,000 students majoring in natural resources, becoming the largest undergraduate natural resources program in the country and, when they graduated, they got jobs.”

Trainer went on to serve on the Natural Resources Board in the 1970s and early 1980s. He became very involved with land acquisition, serving on one of the first Stewardship committees.

“Land use should be a top priority in natural resources,” he said. “Leopold used to write that in the southern half of the state the farmer dictated what we would have for wildlife, and in the northern half the forester dictated. It is a matter of habitat and land use.”

Trainer knew that politics were always a part of natural resources, but believed it should be a minor part.

“You did the right thing for the right reasons, biologically or for the resource, and then you looked at the political ramifications. Now, I think people look first at the political ramifications and whatever is left over is for the resource,” he said.

While he was on the NRB, he said that Dreyfus never once asked him to vote a certain way.

Trainer said a good NRB member is someone who looks at things from a statewide standpoint and is objective.

“You can’t be an expert on all of these things, so you have to listen,” Trainer said. “The DNR holds the natural resources in trust for the public, and the board is in charge of the DNR.”

This writer had the privilege of serving with Trainer on the Wisconsin Hall of Fame Board of Governors. After he retired from that board, he was asked about some of his outdoor experiences. He said the best deer hunting he ever had was when he and his father and neighbors around Princeton put on

drives for deer.

“People hunted for nine days back then and they actively hunted,” he said, comparing it to today when many only hunt opening weekend and primarily sit on stands. “Thanksgiving was normally observed after the deer season.”

Trainer was concerned about the quality of today’s hunting experience. “Many hunters set bait out and sit up in a tree or treestand equipped with a TV and heat,” he said. “I don’t see much quality in shooting a deer over bait. I like deer hunting, but I don’t bait and never did. If you sit there long enough, a nice buck will come along. But, land use has changed so much it is hard to drive deer. It used to be that I knew all of the farmers and could hunt anywhere I wanted, but not now when 40 acres is owned by several people. Land use patterns are so different.”

Trainer said that wildlife management is not an exact science, just like population estimates are not always exact. He thought the state needed a longer season than just nine days of gun hunting, and wanted to see the state try different deer regulations in different parts of the state, because what works in Dodge County may not work in Dunn County.

Trainer’s father taught him a lot about life through hunting.

“One time while hunting, I missed a pheasant and grumbled in the car on the whole way back home,” Trainer said. His dad told him to put his shotgun away for the rest of the day because he obviously didn’t enjoy hunting.

“That taught me something: everything you do in life, enjoy it, or don’t do it,” Trainer said.

Memorials may be sent to the “UWSP Foundation – Dan Trainer Scholarship Fund” and mailed to: UWSP Foundation, 2100 Main Street, Suite 212, Stevens Point, WI 54481.

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