

NEWS

Wisconsin conservationist Martin Hanson dies at 81

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MADISON, Wis.—Martin Hanson, a prominent Wisconsin conservationist who helped preserve the pristine Apostle Islands in Lake Superior, has died. He was 81.

Hanson was found dead outside his log cabin in Mellen in northern Wisconsin on Wednesday afternoon, said William Bechtel, a longtime friend. He had been in poor health and apparently had fallen and broken his hip, he said.

The heir to a Chicago furniture manufacturing fortune, Hanson lived most his life on the estate his father purchased for recreation. Martin and his late brother, Louis, were prominent Democrats known for entertaining politicians with food, drink and the great outdoors.

Hanson was the tour guide for President John F. Kennedy when he visited the Apostle Islands in August 1963 as U.S. Sen. Gaylord Nelson pushed to designate them as national parkland.

The tour—Kennedy's last official trip before his assassination—was designed to get Kennedy's backing for the plan, said Bechtel, who was an aide to Nelson, a Wisconsin Democrat known as the founder of Earth Day.

Kennedy flew into Duluth, Minn., and then took a helicopter ride with Hanson

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“Martin Hanson specifically pointed out the amount of sailboats they could see, and Kennedy said at the time it reminded him of his area back in Massachusetts,” Bechtel said. “Martin did make a real contribution—and he’s very proud of it—of getting the president interested in the area as a marvelous asset.”

Kennedy stopped short of endorsing the plan when he gave a speech in Ashland but did promote conservation, Bechtel said.

Hanson wanted to preserve the islands from logging and development, he said. After years of lobbying for the plan, Congress passed a bill creating the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore in 1970.

Today, the 21 islands in the park are often called the “Jewels of Lake Superior.” Considered one of the most pristine parks in the nation, the Apostle Islands are a popular destination for camping, fishing, swimming and photography.

Hanson helped organize Friends of the Apostle Islands, which raises money for special projects there. Not having to work for a living, he spent his days as a wildlife photographer and filmmaker chronicling the beavers and wolves that populate northern forests.

Gov. Jim Doyle called Hanson “one of Wisconsin’s greatest conservationists.” Doyle commended his work to preserve the Apostle Islands and his donation of hundreds of acres of pristine northern Wisconsin land to the University of Wisconsin-Madison for research.

“Martin Hanson dedicated his life to making our state a better place to live,” Doyle said in a statement. “His conservation efforts have made a lasting imprint on our state that are certain to be enjoyed and remembered for generations to come.”

Hanson also is credited with being a driving force behind the successful reintroduction of elk into the Chequamegon National Forest.

Democratic Party Chairman Joe Wineke said Hanson also was one of the founders of the modern Democratic Party in Wisconsin.

“Most of all, Martin was fun to be around, a guy with a great personality,” Wineke said. “That’s probably the reason Gaylord Nelson chose him to act as guide when President Kennedy visited the Apostle Islands.”





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