



Martin Hanson

'It's the hand of man that destroyed it (the natural environment); the hand of man can bring it back far greater by management.'

—Martin Hanson

Martin Hanson's life has been devoted to conservation and preservation of natural resources. For this, he is much beloved by friends and associates.

A quiet man who lives alone in the north woods near Mellen, he has played an important role in scores of conservation causes. He lined up local support one person at a time for the Apostle Islands National Seashore. He worked to help gain Wild and Scenic River status for the St. Croix and Namekagon rivers. His north woods retreat has been a get-away for conservationists and politicians for years. When the Martin Hanson Theater was dedicated at the sprawling Northern Great Lakes Visitors Center near Ashland, hundreds showed up. He's known across the north and well beyond. He has literally worked on conservation causes elbow-to-elbow with world leaders. An example:

In September 1963, President John F. Kennedy visited northern Wisconsin as part of a conservation tour.

Kennedy boarded a military helicopter to tour the Apostle Islands of Lake Superior. He was joined by U.S. Sen. Gaylord Nelson; Gov. John Reynolds; U.S. Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall; and Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman. The helicopter also took aboard Hanson, an expert on the islands, who acted as the president's guide.

Years later, Hanson would recall the helicopter ride in an interview with the Milwaukee Journal. "On the helicopter, I was lecturing the president about the Apostles. I said you could get them cheap, but he didn't seem too interested. Then he saw a big group of sailing boats and his eyes lit up. Here was the Massachusetts sailor seeing some of the best sailing water around," Hanson said.

Two months later, Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. But his support gave the Apostles project a needed boost. In 1970, after continuing efforts by Hanson and others, President Richard Nixon signed a bill sponsored by Nelson to create a 42,000-acre Apostle Island National Lakeshore that preserved 20 of the 22 islands.

Milwaukee Journal reporter Paul G. Hayes wrote of the campaign to establish the National Lakeshore, "Anyone who remembers the effort, including his opponents, says it was Martin's tenacity that got the job done locally." Hanson is quick to deflect attention. In an interview for this biography, he talked sparingly about his long list of conservation achievements. "I've tried to be a good citizen," he said. "I try to stick with things, but

play a minimal part. You have to stick with them. You can't just pop an idea and make something happen."

Dozens of testimonial letters from national political and conservation figures attest that Hanson has stuck with numerous causes over the years. The letters were submitted as part of Hanson's nomination portfolio.

Nelson, a life-long friend and associate and 1986 Conservation Hall of Fame inductee, said this in a 2001 testimonial letter: "I have had the privilege of working closely with Martin on a number of Wisconsin projects, including the Apostle Islands and the St. Croix River. In his quiet way he is an eloquent and effective advocate of any conservation cause that he undertakes."

Nelson added, "Martin is that rare, ideal citizen conservationist who makes good things happen wherever he may be. Fortunately he has been in Wisconsin for the past half century."

Hanson and Nelson have worked together on Democratic Party politics and conservation efforts for five decades. Hanson was born in 1926 in Oak Park, Illinois, and lived there as he grew up an heir to a furniture making fortune in Chicago. He and his bachelor brother Louis moved permanently in 1961 onto 1,240 acres west of Mellen in Ashland County, but they had spent many childhood days there, too. Their father, Martin, who liked to fish, bought the land in 1926. The father and his brother and business partner, John, dammed the Brunsweler River, enlarging Beaverdam Lake to 125 acres. On a point of land on the lake, they built Beaverdam Lodge, including a dining hall and sleeping quarters. The Hanson children romped there in the summertime.

Northern Wisconsin was still in the throes of the post-logging era then, and Martin recalled that times were so tough in the region that men of the north set fires in the slash at night in order to collect pay as volunteer firefighters in the day.

The Hanson youths also watched as the forest came back during the New Deal Era, aided by the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Wisconsin Conservation Commission and the U.S. Forest Service.

Hayes wrote this: "The firsthand observation of regeneration may be the source of Martin Hanson's optimistic, hands-on approach to the natural environment." He quoted

Hanson saying, "It's the hand of man that destroyed it; the hand of man can bring it back far quicker by management."

Martin Hanson fished and hunted as a boy. By 14, he was hunting bear. His outdoors experiences merged with another interest, filmmaking, and he made movies and later videotapes of wildlife. This skill would be used to further the conservation cause through education of others.

Hayes wrote this of the Hanson brothers: "Louis plunged as eagerly into history and political lore as Martin had the outdoors. Neither had finished college, but both acquired vast knowledge. Their separate interests came to distinguish the brothers: Louis was known as the politician, Martin the conservationist, but such labels oversimplify; of course, the brothers shared both interests."

Martin Hanson educated himself in the environmental sciences. He used this knowledge in his activities, and served as narrator of his own wildlife films. Cameras were his hobby, both motion and still, and he turned the hobby into a valuable tool for influencing how people learned about conservation issues. He often showed the films to diverse groups as he sought to make a point about a conservation topic.

He continues to make videos to this day, including a project focusing on beavers and their role in aquatic ecosystems. The project has been three years in the works. In autumn 2004, the 78-year-old visited the same secret pond for more than a month, capturing beaver activity from a blind. His feelings on beavers: "There are only two species that make dams, humans and beavers. They're part of the natural ecosystem." There are times to remove beavers to prevent flooding and other problems, but wholesale elimination is wrong, he said. "They should have registered trap lines, so that one person traps an area. That way the trapper wouldn't take everything. The Canadians have had that system forever."

Another Hanson video focuses on denning habits of polar bears in and near the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. He documents that the bears' denning options are limited and that upheavals to that ecosystem could threaten the population.

He has compiled and catalogued more than 600 two-hour videotapes of wildlife. Hanson has traveled across the world to hunt, fish, film and explore. But he always comes home to the north woods.

The Hansons hosted scores of gatherings at their lodge, where politics and the environment were topics of mostly friendly, if sometimes lively discussions.

Hayes summed it up this way: "The strategy for naming the St. Croix and Namekagon as national scenic rivers took form at the Hansons. Opposition to nuclear power plants jelled at Beaverdam Lodge. Part of the campaign that led to a ban on the pesticide DDT in Wisconsin was fashioned here. The strategy for saving the Apostle Islands in Lake Superior was hatched at the Hanson table."

Hanson's strategy for approaching conservation issues had been honed by the time he began to advocate for the Apostles. "First, he did his homework. Often he made a film, which he then presented to local governments, conservation clubs, unions, social gatherings," Hayes wrote. "He wrote letters, made personal visits and attended meetings, pushing his cause with polite intensity when others might weary. In this way, he built local support, and he did this by understanding whom he was speaking with."

U.S. Rep. David Obey of Wausau, another longtime friend and associate, said Hanson's commitment to conservation stems from a "strong belief in what is right. But he is also able to put various people together with very different views and by listening and working with people, working out practical solutions to so many problems."

Obey's comments came in December 2004, just after Hanson had been honored by the National Parks Conservation Association. He received the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Award, which honors individuals who often go to great lengths to advocate for the protection of the National Park System. The Apostle Islands National Seashore is part of the system.

Other causes that Hanson is credited with successfully championing include establishing the Whittlesey Creek National Wildlife Refuge, obtaining wild and scenic status for the St. Croix and Namekagon rivers, spearheading efforts to reintroduce elk in Wisconsin and working to reintroduce coaster brook trout into the Lake Superior ecosystem. He has worked to protect the sensitive White River watershed in northern Wisconsin. The White River meanders through a clay plain wetland, which has alder and willow thicket, swamp hardwood, bog and northern sedge meadow habitats. This is deemed critical habitat for a large natural ecosystem.

He is also noted for his role in obtaining funding for the Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center in Ashland, considered one of the region's foremost cultural and educational resources, and for ongoing support of the Friends of the Apostle Islands.

Hanson and his family also donated 1,000 acres of their northern Wisconsin pristine wilderness and lakefront property to the University of Wisconsin Arboretum for a natural resources area to be kept "forever wild."

Shortly after taking office in 2002, Wisconsin Gov. James Doyle issued a commendation decree for Martin Hanson. He noted that Hanson "has acted as an advisor and facilitator to numerous Wisconsin and national environmental agencies and elected leaders in regard to conservation issues affecting Northern Wisconsin." Doyle recognized Hanson for his "lifelong activism and commitment to conservation, which have resulted in the betterment of Wisconsin's environment for current and future generations to enjoy."

University of Wisconsin-Madison Emeritus Professor Orrin J. Rongstad documented Hanson's involvement and support of many wildlife research projects conducted by UW-Madison and UW-Stevens Point. "He provided much financial support, personally helped in animal capture and other aspects of the work," Rongstad wrote.

The work included whitetail deer research that started in 1986 and continued through 1999. A total of 270 deer were captured and equipped with radio transmitters during the study.

Hanson is also credited with assisting the late Dr. Ray Anderson of UW-Stevens Point in more than 20 years of black bear studies in the northern forest. Hanson provided housing for Anderson and his students, as he did for Rongstad and his research teams.

Hanson's role on elk research was influential, Rongstad noted. "Martin was the prime mover in obtaining the background information, getting the political support, initiating the research project and getting funding for this reintroduction. If this herd is ever given a name, it should be the 'Martin Hanson Elk Herd.' Martin made several trips to Michigan and Arkansas to take videos and gather information on the reintroduction of elk in these states. Martin edited and narrated several different videos that were used to get political support, and to raise money to get this project started."

Hanson's other contributions to projects included providing planning, facilities and help in a ruffed grouse study conducted by Dr. Don Rusch. He helped set up an aspen regeneration study conducted jointly between UW-Madison Wildlife and Forestry departments and a study to evaluate the impact of white-tailed deer on the northern Wisconsin plant communities conducted by Dr. Don Waller of the UW Botany Department.

Wildlife ecology students visited the Hanson property for several years. Hanson provided lodging and led field trips to show what a private landowner could do to create habitat for wildlife. Several of his videos were shown to classes at UW.

"I have known many of the previous honorees of the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame. Martin Hanson's contributions to Conservation in Wisconsin Ranks among the best of these recipients," Rongstad wrote. "Unlike many of the others who received this award for things they accomplished on their jobs, almost all of Martin's contributions have been made as a volunteer."

While Hanson often worked behind the scenes, he also provided key leadership to causes. He was named the first chair of the Wisconsin Council for Resource Development and Conservation, serving from 1962-72. The group was formed at the behest of then Gov. Gaylord Nelson to provide a unified statewide voice speaking on key conservation issues. Historian Thomas Huffman described the group this way: "In many ways, this group proved a forerunner of the Wisconsin environmental organizations of the 1970s. It...established an intellectual perspective involving the issues of the 'new conservation,' an approach considerably broader than the hunting, fishing and forestry concerns of the traditional state conservation community."

Harold "Bud" Jordahl, UW-Madison emeritus professor in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning, was on Nelson's staff at the time and provided assistance in forming the council. He recalled Hanson's efforts: "Martin Hanson provided great leadership to the fledgling organization...With a deft hand, he guided the organization to reach agreements on the important conservation issues of the day. Because the group represented a much broader perspective on conservation than traditional groups, and was consistent and persistent in lobbying efforts, it grew into a formidable influence with the Legislature."

Jordahl also recalled assisting the Hanson family with the donation of 1,000 acres of land and water to the UW-Madison Arboretum. The Hansons worked for decades to restore the property after the logging boom.

Jordahl estimated the gift to be worth well in excess of \$1 million. It consists of a largely undisturbed second growth forest, several miles of undeveloped wild lake shoreline, trails, rock outcrops, a river gorge, an excellent research area and forest for hunting, fishing and passive forms of outdoor recreation.

Stephen Born, professor of planning and environmental studies at UW-Madison and a national leader with Trout Unlimited, commended Hanson for his efforts to reintroduce the once-abundant coaster brook trout in Lake Superior and its tributaries. "Starting more than a half a decade ago, Martin Hanson got excited about the possibility of restoring the once-abundant populations of the magnificent coasters." Born credits Hanson for creating a "superb video on coaster brook trout and the potential of reintroduction. He showed that video at numerous governmental meetings and widely distributed it to professionals and conservation organizations around the state...In addition, he worked in a bipartisan fashion with state legislators successfully to gain support in the 2001-02 state budget for planning and demonstration of coaster trout reintroduction in several Lake Superior tributaries."

Retired Michigan Department of Natural Resources wildlife biologist Douglas A. Whitcomb documented Hanson's extensive efforts to reintroduce elk in Wisconsin. Elk had been reintroduced in Michigan in 1918, and the Lower Peninsula has a herd of more than 1,500. Hanson's efforts were tireless, Whitcomb recalled. They included eight years of visits to elk yards to videotape the herd. He usually brought someone along. "Included in his entourage were people from the U.S. Forest Service, college professors, Wisconsin DNR personnel and local politicians. They all ended up at our kitchen table talking about elk," recalled Whitcomb, who helped Wisconsin DNR personnel learn about elk reintroduction.

The DNR initially opposed reintroduction, but when then Gov. Tommy Thompson took an interest in it, the agency turned around. Reintroduction efforts began in 1995. Whitcomb took note of the ceremonies celebrating the reintroduction in Wisconsin in 1995. "In May, at the release of the 25 elk in Wisconsin, there were several

occasions where a number of people were giving speeches commemorating the reintroduction effort. Thank-yous and pats on the back were given generously by politicians and DNR personnel. As I recall these speeches, little mention was given to the efforts of Martin Hanson.”

For one who has never sought fanfare, that probably didn't bother Martin Hanson.

MARTIN HANSON

BIRTH: Jan 23, 1927, Oak Park, Illinois

EDUCATION: Grade school and high school in Oak Park, Illinois
Attended Northwestern University Engineering School for three years. Left to join U.S. Navy.

MILITARY SERVICE: Veteran, U.S. Navy, 1944-45.

BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

OCCUPATIONAL

A wildlife film maker, he created dozens of films, often used to influence decision-making and build support for various conservation projects.

Served as home secretary for U.S. Rep. David Obey for 13 years.

Headed Wisconsin campaign for Rep. Morris Udall for President in 1976.

AFFILIATIONS

Chair, Wisconsin Council for Resource Development and Conservation, 1962-72. The group was formed at the behest of then Gov. Gaylord Nelson to provide a unified statewide voice speaking on key conservation issues.

Life member, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.

AWARDS/RECOGNITION

National Parks Conservation Association Marjory Stoneman Douglas Award, 1984, in recognition of his advocacy of the National Park System.

U.S. Department of Agriculture Certificate of Appreciation, July 7, 1990, "for concern, care and interest in the management of natural resources."

U.S. Department of Interior, National Park Service Special Commendation, Aug. 25, 1995, "for outstanding lifelong service in preserving the resources of the Apostle Islands for all Americans."

U.S. Department of Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service Citation "In grateful recognition of your support and contribution to the establishment of the Whittlesey Creek National Wildlife Refuge."

Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation Imperial Partner, "in grateful appreciation for your contribution to Wildlife, Habitat and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation."

Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation Special Recognition Award, July 19, 1997, "For your leadership and dedication in the Wisconsin Elk Reintroduction Study project. Your efforts were critical to bringing elk back to the great state of Wisconsin."

Wisconsin State Council of Trout Unlimited Certificate of Appreciation, Feb. 7, 1998.

Lee and Joan Wulff Conservation Award, Wisconsin State Council of Trout Unlimited, 2000.

Friends of the Center Alliance Ltd., Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center, Certificate of Appreciation, Sept. 19, 1998.

SOURCES

Several quotes attributed to Hanson are from an article titled "The Last Lord of Camelot North," published Feb. 20 1994, in the Milwaukee Journal Wisconsin Magazine.

Other quotes attributed to Hanson are from a telephone interview conducted on behalf of the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame in July 2003 and a personal visit by the author in April 2005.

Historian Thomas Huffman's quote regarding Hanson's role as chair of the Wisconsin Council for Resource Development and Conservation is from a 1989 Ph.D. thesis at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, entitled "Protectors of the Land & Water: The

Political Culture of Conservation and the Rise of Environmentalism in Wisconsin, 1958-70.”

Quotes from U.S. Rep. David Obey were in a December 4-5 issue of The Daily Press, Ashland.

Other sources of information are gathered in the excellent biography provided to and archived by the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame.

July 2003

Bill Berry

Updated May 2005 to incorporate new information on awards he has received.

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