

Ingeborg Lothe

The conservation movement has long been embraced by certain segments of the public. Hunters, fishers, lovers of the outdoors, are often among the most dedicated conservationists.

But any movement needs the support of a wide array of people to remain vibrant, and Ingeborg “Inge” Lothe of Poynette carried the conservation message to new audiences. They included women’s clubs around the state and country and local policy-making bodies that likely needed some nudging to move them toward some of the ideas she offered.

Lothe’s legacy in Wisconsin will likely focus on three major areas: She was a pioneer in the area of local and regional recycling efforts. She was an early leader in efforts to broaden the audience for environmental education. She was also a leader at the national level, taking the conservation message to women from all over the country.

She served as national conservation chair for the General Federation of Women’s clubs through much of the 1970s, chairing conservation training sessions and workshops for women from around the country. She oversaw at least 10 of these kinds of educational forums, reaching thousands of women with messages about how they could make conservation work at home.

Lothe talked about the need to educate people about environmental issues in a 1990 DNR Digest interview: “It takes education to keep issues in front of the public; environmental education never ends.”

In Columbia County, where she and her husband Irvin were dairy farmers and fur farmers for almost a quarter-century, Lothe was putting words into action.

She is credited with leading efforts to develop the MacKenzie Environmental Center into a first-rate environmental education learning center.

She helped steer Columbia County government toward wise conservation decisions. Her involvement with county politics is well documented, and she is credited with helping to steer the county to recycling, rather than development of landfill sites. She served on and chaired the county Solid Waste Commission that helped initiate that change and also began a state-funded co-composting project.

The Portage Daily Register noted in a 1986 article that “thanks to their work, Columbia County has set an example in waste management for other counties to follow.”

The county's recycling program was also recognized by the National Recycling Coalition as the "Most Outstanding recycling program in the nation."

Lothe had dozens of other conservation assignments, from state committees to local activities in Poynette, where she still lives. She gave similar amounts of time to other causes, human services, education and health among them. In all of those areas, she volunteered time on board and commissions that set policies.

Her leadership was hands-on, and it came at a time when women were asking for more opportunities to lead. In 1988, Lothe became the first woman ever elected chairman of the Columbia County Board. "One thing just led to another," she told Madison Capital Times reporter Jerry Ambelang. She insisted on keeping the title "chairman" and credited her unanimous election to her hard work as a county supervisor on conservation, environmental and human services causes.

Her interest in conservation and the environment developed early in her life. She grew up on the Jens and Helga Viken homestead in rural Sun Prairie, and she attended a one-room school for her early years of education.

She and her husband, Irvin, were dairy farmers in the Sun Prairie area for several years. Later they moved to the Poynette area, where they were in the fur business for many years. Their farming activities stretched across four decades, from the late 1930s to 1970.

That year marked a major shift for Lothe. She started as the state women's club president in 1970. The pace of her volunteer conservation activities picked up considerably, too, leading to her involvement in national women's club efforts to educate members about conservation.

Things were happening at home, too. Her work in the fur business had taken her to the MacKenzie Environmental Center just outside of Poynette when it was still part of the State Experimental Game and Fur Farm. She had attended seminars on fur farming earlier, and she returned to the center as a representative of the Wisconsin Federation of Women's Clubs, attending a U.S. Forest Service workshop. She credited that experience with building her environmental and conservation awareness. When she became state president of the women's clubs, her theme was "For a Better Environment."

Her love for the MacKenzie Center prompted Lothe to take a leading role in setting up the Department of Natural Resources' first "Friends" program. She appeared before the Natural Resources Board in 1975 for approval and then organized the "Friends of the MacKenzie Environmental Center" in 1978. She served for seven years as the group's first president and was instrumental in garnering funds for build handicapped-accessible trails, develop education materials for the wildlife exhibit and upgrade the arboretum. She told DNR Digest that she was especially proud that so many student groups visited the center. "At MacKenzie, students become aware of environmental problems and can see first-hand what is written in their books. They get a better understanding of natural resource uses, problems and issues while developing responsibility and support for management."

While supporting efforts to educate young people at MacKenzie, Lothe was also working on educating another audience. She chaired the Columbia County Solid Waste Commission when it developed its innovative recycling program.

Columbia County's county-wide recycling program was the first of its kind in Wisconsin, according to the DNR. It also dovetailed with another of Lothe's causes, human services.

"The recycling program's staff included clients on the county's general relief and AFDC roles, who worked under a workfare program," the DNR noted. Reflecting on that aspect of the program, Lothe said: "Not only did the work benefit the program, but it helped the workers develop job skills and got them back into the work routine."

The program was recognized by the National Recycling Coalition in 1986 for being the "most outstanding regional recycling program in the nation." The program was credited with keeping thousands of tons of materials out of the landfill, saving municipalities many thousands of dollars in landfill fees and actually generating revenue.

Lothe was also a leader in efforts to establish the Columbia County co-composting project. Many communities now regularly employ such programs in their efforts to keep materials out of their landfills. Project Coordinator Aga Razvi, a University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point professor of waste management, credited the project with proving that co-composting works as a viable alternative to disposing solid waste in a landfill.

Lothe steered her county toward recycling and source separation well before many other areas of Wisconsin had given those strategies much thought. She reflected on their importance: “Source separation and recycling is a method for disposing of solid wastes. It is a solution to the waste disposal problem, one with three ‘R’s,’ – reduce, reuse and recycle.”

Well before Wisconsin adopted a statewide recycling program, Lothe said this: “Recycling is here to stay and should be made mandatory statewide, and, in time to come, nationwide.”

In addition to the work mentioned in this narrative, Lothe also served as a member of the Governor’s Council on Forest Productivity from 1983-86 and the Wisconsin Waste Facility Siting Board from 1984-90.

She has earned national and state recognitions, including commendations from two Wisconsin governors, Warren Knowles and Anthony Earl.

She told The Capital Times that her favorite words are “volunteer, participate and service to others.”

Lothe reflected for the DNR on her many conservation activities this way:

“Having been born on a farm in Columbia County, raised on a farm and being in the dairy and fur farming business before my husband retired has given me a great insight into the values of our natural resources.”

That knowledge and appreciation helped her as she became active in volunteer causes across the state and nation. Those experiences, in turn, enriched her conservation background.

“Being active and acquainted with our whole state, plus all of the work done nationally, gives me a broad background in conservation in so many areas,” she said.

Asked about her perspective on future conservation and environmental issues, Lothe said this:

“We can be very proud of Wisconsin for all of our efforts, but we still have concerns and many challenges. With an increased population and changes in technology and lifestyles, we must consider the whole environment for our livelihood – the air we breathe, the water we use, the energy needed, recreation, transportation. All involve natural resources and its conservation.”

INGEBORG 'INGE' LOTHE

- BIRTH:** Sept. 16, 1915, Columbia County.
- EDUCATION:** Triangle One-Room School, Sun Prairie.
Madison East High School.
- HONORS:** Who's Who in American Women (1966).
- Conservation Recognition from Gov. Warren Knowles (1972). Also recognized by Gov. Tony Earl.
- Winner, Mrs. Lyndon Baines Johnson Award for Keep America Beautiful (1977).
- Winner, State Theodora Yeoman's Citizenship Award, Wisconsin Federation of Women.
- Shell Oil Co. Award for Outstanding Leadership in Conservation (1978).
- U.S. Forest Service 75th Anniversary Award (1981).
- President's Volunteer Action Award, recognition from Ronald and Nancy Reagan (1982.)

BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

- Dairy Farmer with husband, Irvin Lothe (1938-44).
- Fur Farmer with husband (1944-72).
- Clerk, Board of Education, Poynette (1953-67).
- President, Poynette Women's Club (1954-56).
- Held several offices in Wisconsin Federation of Women's Clubs (1958-70).
- President, Wisconsin Federation of Women's Clubs (1970-72).

Member, Board of Directors, General Federation of Women's Clubs, the largest service group of women volunteers in America. Chairman, Natural Resources Management Division for Federation. Vice President, Mississippi Valley Conference for Federation. National Conservation Department Chair for Federation. Chairman, two National Conservation Conferences-Training Women for Federation. Organized eight regional conservation workshops for Federation (activities took place from 1972-78).

Member, Cooperative Educational Services Agency Board of Control (1965-67).

Secretary, Board of Trustees, Columbia County College (1965-71).

State Chairman, Joint Committee on Education (1969-71).

National Chairman, General Federation of Women's Clubs/Shell Environmental Conservation Award (1974-78).

National Chairman, General Federation of Women's Clubs, Keep America Beautiful (1974-78).

Columbia County Nursing Home Committee (1975-).

Board of Directors, Wisconsin Youth Symphony.

DNR Secretary's Advisory Board for MacKenzie Environmental Center for several years.

Chairman, Friends of MacKenzie (1978-85).

Columbia County Board of Supervisors (1980-92).

Vice Chairman, Columbia County Board of Supervisors (1986-88).

Chairman, Columbia County Board of Supervisors (1988-92).

Chairman, Columbia County Human Services Board for several years.

Columbia County Solid Waste Commission Chairman for four years, secretary for two years (1980-86).

Columbia County Social Services and Health Commission Chairman for four years, Secretary for two years (1980-86).

Governor's Council on Forest Productivity (1983-86).

State Waste Facility Siting Board (1984-90).