

Herb Behnke, Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame Presentation

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By Tom Lyon

Herb, Lenore, Chris and Kelly, Cousin Jim, and Distinguished Guests,

It is a very distinct honor for me to be a bit player in the induction of Herb Behnke into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame. I came to Wisconsin from Iowa more than forty years ago. I had never owned a gun, a boat or a fishing pole, and had never seen a white-tailed deer loping through a meadow. Early on Herb became my mentor on the great issues of Wisconsin's conservation culture---how many deer are in the woods, and how many walleyes are in the lake. I quickly came to realize these statistics are well-known by any sportsman worthy of a Northern Wisconsin bar stool, but they are generally not in agreement with the Departmental of Natural Resources surveys. From that introduction Herb and I became business colleagues for a quarter century and friends for more than four decades. I found it an interesting phenomenon that hundreds of Wisconsin citizens will attend a county meeting of the Conservation Congress to rail about deer hunting regulations but often times no more than two or three will attend the annual budget meeting of the local school district.

As a young lad reared on a rocky Marinette County farm during the depression and drought stricken 1930's, Herb would have been judged an unlikely candidate to join the likes of Muir, Leopold, Nelson, Knowles, Hanson, and others in this Hall of Fame. During those depression years he assisted his parents produce and sell milk, meat and vegetables to the local residents. He was involved in advocating locally grown foods when it meant economic survival, and long before it became the "in thing" on TV food shows.

While on the farm, he witnessed the economic trauma caused by the disposal of his family's and their neighbor's dairy herds due to tuberculosis and brucellosis, diseases easily transmittable to wildlife.

Those early experiences impressed upon him the importance of protecting our land and water resource. The cliché is overused but Herb Behnke is truly "a self-made person".

For those of you who know Herb only through his conservation activities I want the record to show he also held a "day job".

Without the resources to enter college, soon after high school, he joined the employment of a farmer-owned cooperative that was engaged in a new science, the artificial breeding of cattle that brought research findings to on-the-farm application. From this early introduction to the land grant university research and outreach mission, Herb became an advocate of sound science as a means of problem identification and resolution--- experiences that would serve him well as he passed judgment on thousands of natural resource issues.

During his 42-year tenure, he held every marketing position in the organization, and through the cooperative structure had contact with thousands of Wisconsin farmers. One often hears that “farmers are the greatest preservers of the land.” That may be too broad a generalization but not subject to question is they control much of Wisconsin’s land base, and their actions are vital to the sustainability of the landscape. Herb effectively represented their interests, and many times negotiated their concerns with those of the more puritanical environmentalists. I have been witness to Behnke’s square jaw approach when he believed either of the sides was attempting to cloud facts with emotion.

He was a major contributor toward propelling the cooperative into one of national and international prominence with his leadership skills being well recognized. Herb served as President of the national cattle breeding trade association and received their Distinguished Service Award. He also received the highest recognition given by the Wisconsin cooperative business community and was named Wisconsin Agri-Marketer of the Year.

His Avocation

Beyond his relationship to the land, Herb Behnke’s early love affair with hunt’in and fish’in led him to an avocational career of leadership in natural resource conservation and environmental sustainability. It began through involvement in the Conservation Congress and Northeast Wisconsin Planning Commission. These experiences led to appointment by Governor Warren Knowles to the Wisconsin Conservation Commission in 1967. When the state conservation and resource development agencies were merged into the Department of Natural Resources in 1968, Governor Knowles appointed Herb to the newly formed DNR Board. He served until 1972, and was again appointed by Governor Thompson in 1989 serving until 2006. Serving as chairman four years, he retired as the state’s longest tenured board member.

Herb Behnke's special interest group was Wisconsin's "Joe Lunch Pails". He worked tirelessly to afford all citizens the opportunity to enjoy and learn from the wealth held in Wisconsin's outdoors. He holds the strong conviction that preservation of the Wisconsin landscape is in the intelligent best interests of all citizens, that citizens should have affordable access, and the land and water should not be used and abused by special interest groups solely for economic gain.

He provided considerable leadership in establishing the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program. When he first joined the DNR Board, it controlled 804,000 acres. It is now more than double that number. He took special interest in purchases along the Wolf River Bottoms, the Navarino Wildlife Center and the Mountain Bay Trail.

It is customary that upon a DNR board member's retirement, a particular holding is renamed in the person's honor. Some of us in and outside the DNR lobbied hard to have the infamous beach at Mazomanie be renamed "Behnke's Beach". We thought it had a nice ring but the folks in charge thought better and named a portion of the Wolf River Bottomlands near Shiocton in recognition of his service.

Herb Behnke is the consummate politician in the finest sense of the word. He is a listener adept at separating the common good from special interest wants, and bringing competing interest together in way that neutralized conflict.

Time and again he demonstrated this trait in dealing with issues from water pollution to fish and game regulations. His integrity has never been jeopardized.

There was no question where Herb Behnke stood when Governor Thompson changed the authority of the Natural Resources Board. Herb has been forever convinced that the state's citizens are best served when a Governor appoints the board, the board engages the chief administrator and establishes policy, and trained professionals manage the agency's capital and human resources. In his view partisan politics should be minimized when the management of our natural resource is being determined.

His early experience and later introduction to the power of scientific discovery told him "feeding and baiting" would be highly detrimental to maintaining a healthy deer population. He also warned that an uncontrolled wolf population would not be compatible with the economics of beef cattle production. Wolves eat young calves. He has been proven right.

Herb Behnke is a visionary who consistently took the long view and deplored decisions based upon political expediency. He did not have a public stage like Professor Leopold, Senator Nelson and others but his persistent positive presence in the natural resource policy arena has been just as great.

Recognition and Community Service

Herb Behnke's contributions have not gone unnoticed. The Wisconsin Outdoor Journal named him one of the State's top 20 conservationists in the 20th century. He was named to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Sports Show Hall of Fame in 2003. Other honors have been extended by the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, Wisconsin Deer and Duck Hunters, Trout Unlimited, and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. His contributions in both agriculture and conservation were recognized by the UW-Madison College of Agriculture and Life Sciences with its Distinguished Service Award. In further recognition by the academic community, Herb has served on the UW-Stevens Point College of Natural Resources advisory committee.

Back home Herb remains active in various conservation and civic causes. He is a life member and major fundraiser for the Navarino Nature Center, where more than 3,000 students a year learn about nature. Active in civic organizations and his church, he received the Shawano Area Distinguished Citizen of the Year Award in 2001.

Upon retirement he made his first entry into elective office, serving as township clerk. Winning his first term by seven votes, he became known among some of us locals as "Landslide Behnke". He added a level of professionalism to those township meetings not witnessed before.

Herb has an innate ability to make friends and gain the confidence of people from all walks of life---from those with big hearts and modest means, to politicians of all stripes, and those of means and assumed power.

Herb Behnke and I have been colleagues and friends for more than four decades. My only disappointment is that I have not been able to extract that "Republican Party Membership Card" from his hefty wallet. As an avowed "Independent" I am not giving up but would admit progress has been slow. Just think how successful he could have been had he responded to my friendly persuasion.

Herb Behnke has provided Wisconsin citizen with superior leadership on two fronts. He was a pioneer and innovator in a sector of agriculture that radically changed the nation's ability to provide its citizens with a safe and secure food supply. And few can match his dedication to the conservation and preservation of our land, water, and air, the paramount ingredients in the life and well-being of us all.

Herb's best day came when Lenore agreed to marriage. And as you would expect son Chris now carries the family's conservation torch for the next generation. Herb, along with Lenore, Chris and Kelly, enjoy the moment. You deserve it.