



Russell W. Peterson  
1916-2011

‘The discovery that all life, air, water, and land are interconnected and interdependent constitutes probably the most significant scientific finding of the past century, particularly since it has been coupled with the realization that human interventions in the natural world have long-term consequences.’

--Russell W. Peterson,  
From ‘Rebel with a Conscience’

Russell Wilber Peterson was born of humble roots in Portage, Wis. He would go on to establish an international reputation as an environmentalist and conservationist, a scientist, humanist, politician, business executive and citizen activist.

His list of accomplishments and the honors they have earned him is much too long to recount in this narrative. A few key awards are mentioned in the narrative. Others are listed in the biographical information.

A few key areas are addressed in the narrative. They include Peterson's ties to Wisconsin and his environmental accomplishments as governor of Delaware (1969-73), president of the Council on Environmental Quality (1973-76) and as a leader of national and international environmental and conservation groups.

Through his work, Peterson has known and served presidents and rubbed elbows with kings and princes. He has led international conferences, shared stages with the likes of Mother Teresa and numbered among his friends most of the major environmental leaders of his time.

He has thrown equal energy into causes that may seem unconnected. He battled to save the environment, worked to rebuild poverty-stricken inner cities and sought reforms in our criminal justice system.

There is, however, a common thread that runs through his work, which continues to this day.

His 1999 autobiographical book, "Rebel with a Conscience," provides insight into his worldview and why, for instance, he sees saving the environment and improving inner cities as being related necessities. Peterson wrote in his book:

"The discovery that all life, air, water and land are interconnected and interdependent constitutes probably the most significant scientific finding of the past century, particularly since it has been coupled with the realization that human interventions in the natural world have long-term consequences."

To this day, Peterson has remained stoutly optimistic about solving what he calls the "global dilemma," caused by human activity and population growth. He believes it possible to provide a better world for future generations of all life.

He wrote in his recent book, "To those who argue that our global family is careening toward disaster by pursuing a way of life that is unsustainable, I reply that we

know how to avoid it. We know how to change the current trends. If we work together we can change them.”

The Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame criteria for induction include the measure of the importance of the nominee’s work on the state of Wisconsin and the nominee’s ties to the state.

The information presented in the next few paragraphs addresses Peterson’s Wisconsin connections. It comes from source material and from a direct interview with Peterson.

“The earliest I got involved worrying about natural resources was when I used to go down to the Wisconsin River to swim and the Fox River to swim,” he said in an interview. It was then, he said, that he realized both of those rivers flowed into the Atlantic Ocean, connecting his home in Wisconsin to the world.

Peterson was born the seventh son of eight to Emma and Anton Peterson of Portage. His father was a baker, and his mother supplemented the family income by selling her own home-baked goods. Peterson recounts in his book that when serious illness and then death struck his father, the family had to accept county assistance for a time.

Doing everything from selling hotdogs at county fairs to picking junk to sell to a salvage business, Peterson earned a doctorate in chemistry from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1942, after eight years of study.

During his college years, he was married to Lillian Turner, a high school friend who grew up near the Aldo Leopold shack along the Wisconsin River.

Years later, Peterson received an honorary doctorate from his alma mater. Another state institution, Northland College, also gave him an honorary degree.

He left Wisconsin upon graduating from UW, taking a position with the DuPont chemical company at locations in the Eastern tier of states.

With many relatives in Wisconsin, including his mother, he continued to visit the state, often several times a year.

Peterson also maintained contacts with UW-Madison throughout his career. He has lectured frequently at the university over the years. Most recently, he gave 11 speeches in four days at UW-Madison in spring 2000. He spoke to a variety of groups

“about how we can save the earth, about how we need to save the earth,” he said. “I try to turn on the students to the big stake we have in altering the negative trends of today.”

His recent visit was organized by the UW-Madison Institute for Environmental Studies. “They arranged a public lecture, which was held at Memorial Union. It was very well attended. There were students three abreast on the floor, standing on tables in back. It was a very rewarding, exciting experience,” he said.

Among the 10 other lectures he gave was one at the School of Business. Peterson said he specifically requested that because he believed the School of Business might contain the most opposition to his positions. Those positions include one he articulates in his book: “We can stop using the Gross Domestic Product as a measure of progress and replace it with the Genuine Progress Indicator.” Using the latter, “We can forgo development that threatens our natural life support systems. We can, through early assessment of new technology, capitalize on its beneficial impacts while avoiding its harmful effects.”

Peterson also recently completed a six-year term on the Board of Visitors for the Institute for Environmental Studies at UW-Madison.

He also served as a consultant to UW-Madison from 1989-92, charged with the task of helping the university develop a vision for the future.

Among his recommendations was one that advised the university to develop a separate college of integrated studies “to turn out bachelor, master’s and Ph.D generalists.” The university didn’t initially adopt his recommendation, but in 1995, it began moving toward that goal.

In an interview, he reflected on his roots in Wisconsin, his work as governor of Delaware, as chairman of the President’s Council on Environmental Quality, as president of the National Audubon Society and other assignments: “I’ve never stopped working for Delaware, never stopped working for Wisconsin in these jobs, because Delaware and Wisconsin are important parts of the world to which I have a special commitment.”

Peterson rose to positions of prominence at DuPont and led major projects such as the effort to take Dacron Polyester Fiber from lab bench to commercial success. But he would find himself at odds with his former employer and with major business and

industrial interests almost immediately after being elected Republican governor of Delaware in 1969.

One of his major accomplishments as governor was to lead the effort to adopt a Coastal Zone Act. This sweeping legislation prohibited all new development of heavy industry in a two-mile wide, 115-mile-long zone that covered the shores of Delaware Bay, the Atlantic coast and bays on the leeward side of Delaware's barrier islands in the south.

He found himself lined up against the State Chamber of Commerce, U.S. Department of Commerce, 13 major oil companies, other international companies and several labor unions. Shell Oil had already obtained rights to construct major refineries in Delaware Bay by the time Peterson took office.

The act was created by a single-vote margin of the Delaware Legislature in 1971, after a highly pitched battle that cost Peterson support in the business community. He was defeated in his bid for a second term.

Delaware is the only state in the union with a Coastal Protection Zone. "That got me known internationally," he reflected in a recent interview. "It was the first time in the world any community was able to win such a battle."

Peterson's term as governor was marked by other accomplishments, including prison reform. He was able to eliminate Delaware's Whipping Post and Debtor's Prison while governor.

That marked the beginning of his career in national and international environmental matters, one that continues today.

In the interest of brevity, several of Peterson's accomplishments in environmental and conservation matters are summarized here. The summary is limited to Peterson's environmental activities. It should be noted that he has an equally long list of accomplishments in other areas, including criminal justice reform and other social causes.

- While chairman of the President's Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) (1973-76), he was instrumental in assuring that the Environmental Impact Statement process was implemented, fending off efforts in the Nixon and Ford administrations to prevent implementation of the process.

- Researchers announced in 1974 the postulation that chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) used in aerosol sprays and as refrigerants were a threat to the ozone layer. As chairman of CEQ, Peterson immediately organized and co-chaired a federal task force to study the matter. When the task force's report was issued five months later, Peterson called for regulations outlawing the use of CFCs in aerosol sprays and for research to find substitutes for use in refrigerants. Twelve months later, the world community adopted a timeline for phasing out production of CFCs.
- Also while at CEQ, Peterson launched three other personal crusades, which he has pursued nationally and internationally. These include his belief that the way to assure adequate energy supplies is to practice more efficient use of energy and develop renewable forms of energy; his belief that environmental regulations are an aid to jobs and economic health, not a detractor; and his belief that population growth is a prime cause of environmental degradation and his belief that a worldwide commitment to reducing birth rates is needed. This led to his involvement in implementing the National Environmental Policy Act, with concern for the whole gamut of environmental problems nationally and globally.
- His work at CEQ was lauded by many, including former Staff Director Steven Jellinek, who said: "Your vision, commitment and tenacity were an inspiration to me and the CEQ staff. More importantly, your courage, your eloquence and your determination to keep the big picture in view provided both inspiration and motivation to the broader environmental community across the nation."
- As president of the National Audubon Society (1979-85), Peterson oversaw an increase in the group's membership. He also led efforts to expand Audubon's scientific and educational capabilities. He strengthened the group's work on influencing environmental decisions and broadened its wildlife protection program to include the impact of population growth on the global environment, energy development and resource consumption. He also led the effort to create an environmental studies program that involves more than 600,000 8- to 12-year-olds in hands-on environmental studies. He launched the "World of Audubon" television series on Turner Broadcasting. In 1994, Chris Palmer, president of Audubon Television, said this of Peterson: "If it were not for Russ Peterson's vision long ago as

president of National Audubon Society, Audubon TV would not be celebrating this year its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary with Turner Broadcasting – 10 years of delivering the environment message to millions upon millions of mainstream viewers.”

- Peterson was also president of the International Council for Bird Preservation from 1982-90, during which time the worldwide conservation organization grew 50-fold.
- As chairman of the Center on the Long-Term Biological Consequences of Nuclear War, Peterson worked with Carl Sagan, Paul Ehrlich and Peter Raven to recruit prominent scientists around the world to inform world leaders and the public about the environmental threat of nuclear weapons. They organized a live interactive TV dialogue between scientists in the U.S. and Soviet Union that informed millions about this issue.
- Peterson has also served as a principal officer in three international environmental organizations and as an ongoing participant in numerous activities of the United Nations.

Former President Jimmy Carter reflected on Peterson’s career in a speech at the University of Delaware in 1993: “Every time something wonderful has happened when I was president and since then in the field of environmental quality in this country or on a global basis, Russ Peterson has been intimately involved in it.”

The League of Conservation Voters gave Peterson its Lifetime Achievement Award in 1995 and said this of him: “Ever the scientist and always the humanist, you have woven these twin passions into a lifetime of dedication to protecting this earth. Whatever the job, whatever the administration, you have put the environment ahead of politics, supporting pro-environmentalists wherever you have found them.”

The National Wildlife Federation gave Peterson its Conservationist of the Year Award in 1994. The Federation’s president and chief executive officer, Jay Hair, saluted Peterson’s “remarkable, unstinting, courageous and insightful contribution to environmental protection around the world.”

The Wilderness Society bestowed its highest honor, The Robert Marshall Award, on Peterson in 1984. The group said of Peterson: “Renaissance man – scientist, scholar, statesman, educator, public servant, author, esteemed colleague: yours has been an extraordinary and profound contribution toward protecting and enhancing the

environment of our nation and our world, following, in your own words, a ‘one world’ vision – so essential to the preservation of this fragile planet.”

Now in his 80s, Peterson continues to innovate. Ted Turner, owner of Turner Broadcasting and numerous other media outlets, said this of Wisconsin’s native son: “Russ Peterson is a true pioneer in using the power of communications media to foster better awareness and support of important issues that threaten our planet.”

In addition to leading the effort to develop “Audubon World,” Peterson has pioneered in other communication venues. His autobiography, “Rebel with a Conscience,” is believed to be the first ever book of memoirs to include an accompanying CD-ROM, which supplements the book with photos, videos, interviews and narration.

Peterson has also produced a CD-ROM titled “We Can Save the World,” intended to be used as an educational tool to encourage students to commit to the environmental cause.

Russell Peterson’s lifetime of work has earned him scores of accolades from environmentalists and world leaders. Perhaps of most interest to the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame is this tribute from Conservation Hall Inductee Gaylord Nelson after he reviewed Peterson’s book:

“I don’t know of anyone who has done more for the environmental cause over the past several decades than you – It’s a remarkable record.”



RUSSELL W. PETERSON  
1916-2011

BIRTH: Oct. 3, 1916, Portage, Wis.

EDUCATION: Undergraduate and Graduate Degrees, University of Wisconsin-Madison.  
Phi Beta Kappa  
Ph.D. in Chemistry, UW-Madison, 1942

HONORS: Annual Award of the National Audubon Society.

Lifetime Achievement Award, League of Conservation Voters (1995).

Lifetime Achievement Award, Global Tomorrow Coalition (1994).

Environmental Law Institute Award (1990).

Order of the Golden Ark awarded at Soestdijk Palace by Prince Bernhard, Prince of The Netherlands (1985).

Gold Medal Award, World Wildlife Fund-USA.

Conservationist of the Year Award, National Wildlife Federation (1994).

Francis K. Hustchinson Medal, Garden Club of America.

Fairfield Osborn Environmental Science Award.

Robert Marshall Award, highest honor of the Wilderness Society (1984).

William Proctor Prize for Scientific Achievement, Sigma Xi, The Scientific Research Society of North America (1978).

Charles Lathrop Parsons Award for Outstanding Public Service, American Chemical Society (1974).

Honorary Doctorates: University of Wisconsin-Madison, Ohio State University, State University of New York-Syracuse, Butler University, Salisbury State University, Farleigh Dickinson University, Stevens Institute of Technology, Williams College, Monmouth College, Gettysburg College, Springfield College, Alma College, Northland College

## BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

Employed at DuPont Co., 26 years, advancing to Director of Development Department's Research and Development Division.

Elected Governor of Delaware, and served from 1969-73.

While governor, was the major force in passage of legislation banning heavy industry from a two-mile strip of Delaware's 115-mile coastline. This was the first state of its kind to adopt sweeping coastal protection legislation.

Served as chairperson on several boards during his term, including Delaware River Basin Commission.

Director of Tri-County Conservancy of the Brandywine, roughly concurrent to his term as governor.

Chairman of President's Council on Environmental Quality, 1973-76. Involved in implementing National Environmental Policy Act, with concern for whole gamut of environmental problems nationally and globally.

Traveled extensively around the world, speaking at conferences and assessing environmental problems.

Principal speaker, 1982 public hearing on state of global environment, London, England.

Speaker at environmental conferences around the world.

Appointed by President Carter to 12-person commission investigating Three Mile Island nuclear accident.

President of National Audubon Society, 1979-85. Active birder, traveling around the world to pursue his interest.

Founding Chairman of the Board of the Global Tomorrow Coalition, an affiliation of 115 organizations concerned with population, resources and environment. Served from 1981-88.

Director, Population Crisis Committee.

Director, the Alliance to Save Energy.

Director, World Wildlife Fund-USA.

Vice President, Regional Councillor to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, 1981-88.

President, International Council for Bird Preservation, 1982-90.

Member: American Ornithologists Union, Linnaean Society, Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council, National Wildlife Federation, National Audubon Society, Pace University Environmental Law Center Advisory Board.

Good Will Ambassador, United National Environment Program; member, United Nations Environment Prize Committee.

Author, "Rebel with a Conscience," 1999. Has also written more than 450 articles and chapters published in magazines and books.

Frequent speaker on TV and radio programs.