

PAUL J. OLSON

Most of the following is taken from an article titled "Con Man on Crutches" by Michael Irwin. Other material is from an article by Mr. Olson, and from nomination papers prepared by Kermit Frater of the Dane County Conservation League.

Reflecting on the the Prairie Chicken Foundation, Paul Olson wrote: "One of the new things on the earth is the concern men have for certain life forms. Sometimes these are plants and animals which provide food for a world with a runaway number of hungry bellies." [Sometimes the concern is for] " . . . species of little practical value. This may, indeed, be little more than a thirst for beauty which each of us defines differently -- a rose rather than a rutabaga."

"Or it can be an odd screwball devotion to preserving and continuing a life form found when we exploded on the continent and now threatened because its living space . . . is being consumed by our more practical values."

Paul Olson's dedication to the environment did not stop nor did it start with the move to perserve habitat for the Prairie Chicken, but it certainly achieved its greatest flowering there. Calling himself a "con man on crutches", Mr. Olson has persuaded, cajoled and embarrassed citizens of the state into preserving the treasures of the State's landscape. To get an idea of this man's

conservation career, reflect on the following:

In 1950 Paul Olson joined the Dane County Conservation League. He became a director, founded its monthly newsletter and served as the paper's first editor. He helped plan the group's game-management, watershed habitat, and reforestation projects. Before developing the Prairie Chicken Foundation, he helped establish cooperative planting projects between the League and the Department of Natural Resources.

After visiting the prairie chicken booming ground on the Buena Vista marsh, Olson asked his friends in the Conservation League for \$200 to purchase some habitat for the native Wisconsin birds then dangerously close to extinction. From 1958 on, under the League's auspices he bought 6,000 acres of prairie chicken range. Cooperating with the Milwaukee-based "Society Tympanikus Cupida Pinnatus", Olson spearheaded the purchase of a total of about 12,000 acres for the protection of the Prairie Chicken. Frederick and Frances Hamerstrom, noted wildlife researchers, have said that Paul Olson's ". . . role in saving the Prairie Chicken from extirpation is one of his outstanding examples of brilliant and successful service to the State of Wisconsin and to the conservation movement."

As an educator, Paul Olson turned his vision of the Conservation Ethic into reality by launching a summer work-learn program for high school students. It started as a project on "borrowed land" where students did conservation work on forests

and streams. Later, when land was donated to the Madison Board of Education for a school forest, Olson, as director of the forest, moved the work-learn program onto the forest where students marked trees for cutting for timber stand improvement, skidded the cut trees, and built log shelters for visitors to the forest. About 10,000 school children per year use the shelters, trails, and the forest itself as a conservation classroom.

According to Olson, "The trouble with most conservationists is they are basically prophets of doom. . . .I've saved the last prairie in Wisconsin six times. . . .Doomsaying is the wrong way to attract people, certainly young people. So I am the cheerful ecologist. Let's take the young to the hills and woods and show them the glories. There is a future, and man will be part of it."

Olson was a founding member of the Wisconsin Chapter of the Nature Conservancy. He was the Chapter's first president, and held that position for 18 years. Under his leadership, the Chapter grew to a membership of about 2,000 and raised about \$2 million. While he was president, the chapter acquired choice spots around the state, including Chiwaukee Prairie, Baraboo Hills (Baxter Hollow), Toft Point in Door County, and Ferry's Bluff.

Olson received the Pacemaker Award in 1965 from the National Education Association and Parade Magazine. In 1967 he was named Conservationist of the Year by the Wisconsin Chapter of the National Wildlife Federation. Recognizing his contributions to the Prairie Chicken, the Department of Natural Resources Board, in

1982, named a 4000 acre tract in the Central Wisconsin Wildlife area the "Paul J. Olson Wildlife Area". The Wisconsin State Journal's "Know Your Madisonian" said that: "The most potent combination of education and conservation in Wisconsin is found in the person of Paul J. Olson."

A disciple of Aldo Leopold, Mr. Olson has paraphrased Leopold to say: "that one species (man) should care for the future of another that cares nothing for him marks the difference between man and the beasts" Olson's comment -- "This is ethics"

This is Olson -- a stubborn man, a man with a vision of a better, more ethical world -- a man with the zeal and drive to hector and lead the rest of us less-motivated mortals to realize the accomplishment of the Environmental Ethic.

Making the Environmental Ethic a reality in lands set aside to provide for the future of a species that cares nothing for humans.

Making the Ethic a reality in setting aside lands to preserve that which was before we came.

Making the Ethic a reality in leading young people to work to realize themselves and to realize the glories of the hills and woods, because there is, after all, a future.

I am proud to present Paul J. Olson as an inductee into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame.