

J. Baird Callicott

(1941-)

Inducted 2025

Baird Callicott was not born and raised in Wisconsin. He did not grow up hunting, fishing, and trapping. He was not nicknamed “River Cat Cal”—a shoutout to “Muskie Mike” Dombeck. Baird was born and raised in Memphis, Tennessee, where cotton was king, until Elvis usurped the throne. In fact, Memphis, *Tennessee* is misleading. Demographically, culturally, and bioregionally, it’s more like the largest city in Mississippi. Baird’s father Burton (1907-2003) was a renowned and beloved regional artist. His mother Evelyne (1909-2001) was a homemaker. When Baird was a kid, he played sports—Little League Baseball, pick-up basketball, touch (and, in college intramurals, flag) football. In high school, he lettered in tennis. His childhood contact with Nature consisted of camping and practicing rudimentary woodcraft with his Boy-Scouts troop and rambles in a large urban park, which was home to a beautiful stand of old-growth bottom-land hardwoods. With the mobility of a driver’s license, Baird explored Shelby Forest, a large state park a few miles north of Memphis. As a teenager, with his father’s help, he built a kayak from a kit and ventured first out into the flat water of lakes, then into flowing streams, and finally into the Mighty Mississippi.

After Baird’s first year of college, he and a friend set off in a skiff with a small outboard motor down the Big Muddy headed for New Orleans. They spent nights on sand bars in military-surplus jungle hammocks. There was something idyllic about floating with the current out in the middle of the big river, and something terrifying when they had to start their outboard and head for shallow water to get out of the way of a big barge bearing down. They didn’t make it to New Orleans. As the River was getting ever bigger with the waters of the Arkansas, the White, and the Yazoo, it was getting ever more dangerous. And they would have had to go through the 80-mile industrial corridor—“Cancer Alley”—from Baton Rouge to NOLA. So, they turned up a backwater that led to Greenville, Mississippi, secured their boat, and hitchhiked back home.

That experience was an early lesson, for Baird, in conservation. The Big Muddy was not just muddy, it was grossly polluted with industrial waste from the papermills on the Wisconsin River, with pesticides and fertilizers from the farm fields of Iowa and Illinois, and with untreated municipal wastewater from Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Memphis. If not for the sheer volume of its waters, the Mississippi would have been little more than an open sewer. Though greatly improved after passage of the Clean Water Act, stretches of the river remain unswimable and unfishable.

Baird started school at age 6 in 1947 and graduated from high school in 1959 at age 18. During that time (and some time after) the Memphis public schools were racially segregated by law. All through high school, he attended the First (and only) Unitarian Church in Memphis with his father. Unitarians, as a wag once quipped, believe in, at most, one God. Sunday services featured not a bible-inspired sermon, but something more like a lecture on such subjects as Transcendentalism and American Pragmatism, all of which so captivated Baird that he aspired to become a Unitarian minister. But during his sophomore year of college, he discovered that what was so captivating in those talks from the pulpit was in fact philosophy. Baird's major professor recommended postgraduate study at Syracuse University, which he was enabled to do by a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship.

Baird's first love was ancient Greek philosophy, especially that of the Presocratics and Plato. After three years in grad school, he had earned an MA, completed his coursework, and passed his qualifying exams. Thus, he had achieved ABD (all but dissertation) status. It snowed that third year in Syracuse on Baird's birthday, May 9th, so he decided to return to warmer climes to write his dissertation. During the summer of 1966, he walked over to the campus of Memphis State University (now University of Memphis) to look up the philosophy department chair and get on the departmental mailing list so he could be informed of upcoming colloquia and visiting lecturers. Baird walked away with a half-time appointment as Instructor, which became full-time the next academic year. At that moment, the Baby Boomers were hitting college age and higher education was experiencing a growth spurt. As Baird's case proves, college teachers were literally being hired off the street.

Memphis State had been desegregated a few years prior, and a small cohort of African American students were enrolled. They wanted to form a Black Students Association, but to be officially recognized as a student organization, they would have to recruit a faculty sponsor. Willie Barnes, a natural leader from deep in the Mississippi Delta, had taken a course with Baird and asked him to serve in that capacity. Most of that service was routinely administrative and academic.

That changed dramatically in early February of 1968. Fed up with abuse, neglect, and poor pay, the surviving Memphis sanitation workers refused to show up for work after two had accidentally been crushed to death while taking shelter from a heavy rain in the trash compacter of a garbage truck. It seems a power surge had activated it. (Black, they were not permitted to shelter in the buildings of the Memphis Public Works Commission.) The newly elected mayor, Henry Loeb, was both enraged and intractable. The strike dragged on into March and drew the support of both national labor leaders and national civil-rights leaders. Baird soon found himself assisting Willie and the other

BSA members in organizing campus marches, demonstrations, and speakers in support of the striking sanitation workers in cooperation with local clergy—White as well as Black—and with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference based in Atlanta. In late March, Martin Luther King, Jr. came to Memphis to add his support. He led a march through downtown Memphis that was anything but peaceful. Looters, unfortunately, ran amuck, alongside the nonviolent protestors, smashing the display windows of department stores and other businesses. The police responded with fury-fueled violence, killing one innocent young man with a shotgun. After the funeral, MLK led a somber follow-up march along the same route to City Hall, and this time it included sympathetic celebrities of movie and TV fame. On April 3rd, he gave his most prophetic and passionate “Mountain Top” speech in Mason Temple. MLK was assassinated on April 4th.

The city of Memphis was traumatized and polarized. MLK was then regarded by most of the majority White population as a provocateur. Those who were allied with him were regarded as subversives. Ingenuous, Baird continued working with the BSA in the civil-rights struggle. At the beginning of the spring semester of 1969, he was surprised—although he should not have been—to receive a letter from the MSU administration informing him that his services would no longer be needed come the fall semester of 1969. With a wife and a baby less than a year old to support, Baird sought a new teaching job and accepted the first offer he got—from Wisconsin State University-Stevens Point. And that’s how he got to Wisconsin at age 28.

Even before this painful and disruptive experience, Baird had begun to question his social engagement via the civil rights movement. He was just a foot soldier in MLK’s nonviolent army—helping organize, marching around carrying signs. Baird wondered if there was a better way to make a positive difference in the world, a way that would employ the resources of his philosophical education. The animating values and ideals of the civil rights movement were formulated in the eighteenth century and enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. MLK repeatedly said that all he was demanding was for America to live up to the values and ideals on which the nation was founded. Subsequent civil-rights thinking was just tinkering around the edges of those values and ideals. But his role models, the Presocratics and Plato, were big thinkers not tinkerers. The other principal progressive concerns of the 1960s were the tragic war in Viet Nam and the emerging environmental movement. The war would end one way or another, but environmental degradation was insidious, persistent, and accelerating. Very little thought through the ages had been given to the proper relationship of humans with Nature. Was it possible for Baird to move on from classical scholarship and civil-rights moonlighting to the intellectual terra incognita of Nature’s-rights—and thus merge his scholarship and social engagement into a single coherent whole?

Yes, it was, thanks principally to what soon became the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and its College of Natural Resources. Getting fired from Memphis State and getting a job at UWSP was—though it didn't seem so at the time—the best thing that ever happened to Baird. He thought back on it as a wildly improbable stroke of luck. His father said, no, it was Providence. Baird did not know it then, but Portage County (of which Stevens Point is the county seat) is located at the northern reach of the Wisconsin Sand Counties, and Aldo Leopold's farm and shack is located in Sauk County at the southern reach. What could be a more fitting landing spot for his eventual development of the conceptual and ethical aspects of conservation, always anchored by the pioneering work on these topics by Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*?

A catalytic moment arrived before Baird's first academic year at UWSP was complete: Earth Day 1970—the country's first. The campus celebration was amazing. Alarmed by Rachel Carson of the prospect of a spring without birdsong, from 8:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m., the gym was packed as faculty, students, and townspeople poured out their pent-up anguish, fears, and frustrations with the quiet crisis (as a book by Stewart Udall, Secretary of the Interior in the Kennedy Administration was titled). Soon after, a group of faculty, convened by UWSP forestry professor Jim Newman, met to explore the possibility of an interdisciplinary environmental studies program. Many undergraduate courses in the College of Natural Resources could be reoriented from an emphasis on timber and game extraction to forest and wildlife conservation. Environmental History had already emerged in the late 1960s as had Environmental Economics. Political Science and Sociology could be readily focused on the emerging environmental movement by members of those departments. Caught up in the moment, Baird rashly volunteered to teach a course in Environmental Ethics.

He had, however, no idea what to teach. There were no textbooks in the field because there was no such field. And Baird had no formal background in the relevant sciences, such as evolutionary biology and ecology. Nevertheless, he figured he could learn from his colleagues in the CNR. Baird's colleagues in the philosophy department, however, were skeptical. But he convinced them that the CNR faculty would steer their students to his new course as a means of satisfying the general-education humanities requirement. At UWSP, primarily a teaching institution, there was a direct link between enrollment and funding. So, holding his nose, the chair forwarded Baird's course proposal to the College of Letters and Sciences curriculum committee and by the end of the following academic year (1971-72) PHIL 380 Environmental Ethics was on the books—the world's first.

Here is what Baird wrote in the Preface to his edited volume, *Companion to A Sand County Almanac: Interpretive and Critical Essays*, published in 1987:

It was in the late spring of 1971 that Robert Ramlow, formerly a student in my course History of Ancient Philosophy, suggested I read *A Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold. He offered to lend me his copy. I was preparing to teach a new course called “Environmental Ethics” at Wisconsin State University-Stevens Point and had no syllabus and no textbooks. . . . I was an expatriate Southerner, fresh from the pitched battles of the Civil Rights struggle in Memphis, Tennessee, and I had heard of neither the book nor its author. I wondered what good an “almanac”—written by someone who, for all I knew, might be an “old farmer”—could possibly do me, a philosopher steeped in the classics, as I desperately tried to build a strange new ethics course from the ground up. Although he found it difficult to say just what sort of book it was, Bob assured me that I would find reading *A Sand County Almanac* very worthwhile. I trusted his judgment; he was a senior majoring in Resource Management and surely knew more about these things than I. Besides, I was staring into the yawning emptiness of a sixteen-week semester, so I could ill-afford to leave any stone unturned in my search for suitable literature.

Eureka! There it was, at the end of the book, “The Land Ethic.” Baird now had something to build upon. His syllabus was a week-to-week work in progress during that first semester, and he just tried to stay a jump ahead of the students. Eventually, he cobbled together enough ancillary readings to get through that first iteration. The large enrollments that he had predicted soon materialized. In a few years, Baird was offering two sections, each with a capacity of 80 students, which usually filled to the brim. *A Sand County Almanac* and its capstone essay “The Land Ethic” remained the centerpiece of his course and soon became a central focus of his research. A few years ago, with its current instructor, Christian Diehm, and Brenda Lackey, the UWSP CNR Associate Dean of Academic Affairs, Baird participated in a public celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the uninterrupted teaching of PHIL 380 at UWSP. The course is now required in over thirty majors in the College of Natural Resources and Environmental Ethics has now expanded to a full program in the UWSP Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies.

Baird began to work out the scientific and philosophical foundations of the Leopold land ethic (and conservation ethics in general) experimentally in the classroom laboratory. Later in the decade, he began to publish the results. With the establishment of *Environmental Ethics* (the journal) in 1979, Eugene C. Hargrove created a dedicated forum and, in effect, consolidated a new field in philosophy. Although going about it before everyone else, Baird discovered, thanks to Hargrove, that there were a few other philosophers thinking about the human-nature relationship in ethical terms. A paper by Baird appeared in vol. 1, no. 1 of the new journal.

Not only was UWSP with its College of Natural Resources ideal for developing a new field in philosophy, Wisconsin was also the intellectual and spiritual epicenter of the North American conservation movement. It was the boyhood home of John Muir, whose work celebrated the National Parks and inspired the wilderness movement. Wisconsin was also home to the mature Aldo Leopold and the locus of more than half the essays in the *Almanac*. Gaylord Nelson, moreover, then a US Senator from Wisconsin, was a congressional sponsor of the bill creating a national Earth Day along with Representative Pete McClosky of California.

Muir, Leopold, and Nelson were deservedly the first inductees into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame. Just south of Stevens Point in Plainfield was the home and site of the conservation work of Frederick and Frances Hamerstrom, students of Leopold and WCHF inductees, whom Baird got to know. He also got to know inductee Nina Leopold Bradley very well, who, with her husband Charles, had relocated from Montana back to Wisconsin. They built a log home from trees she had helped to plant in her youth on property adjacent to the Leopold Memorial Reserve. She had faith in how Baird was exploring, expanding, and grounding her father's land ethic in the history of Western philosophy as well as in evolutionary biology and ecology. She took him under her wing, and he felt like she was a second mother to him. (Nina just had a natural talent for making lots of people feel that way.)

Baird's work soon gained traction, and his publications proliferated. His work garnered national and international recognition. In 1990, *Environmental Ethics* journal editor Gene Hargrove took a position as chair of the University of North Texas philosophy department. His remit it was to transform the UNT department into the world's first to specialize in environmental philosophy and ethics. He recruited Baird to help realize that goal. For his part, Baird saw an opportunity to teach graduate students in the new MA program that Hargrove designed (to which a PhD program was soon added) and to enjoy more support for his research. So, he returned to the South in 1995—after the prime 25 years of his life were so richly, rewardingly, and happily spent in the sand counties and glacial moraines of Wisconsin. Now retired from UNT, Baird still considers Central Wisconsin as his intellectual and spiritual home. Currently residing in the Baja Midwest (more particularly, Louisville, Kentucky), he certainly gets back to Wisconsin—where he has many friends, old and new—way more frequently than he does to Texas. Underscoring his ongoing Wisconsin affiliation, Baird served two three-year terms (2020-2026) on the board of directors of the Aldo Leopold Foundation located near Baraboo.

Baird is the author of 18 books (including translations into French, Spanish, Japanese, and Chinese). He is co-editor of *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays by*

Aldo Leopold, For the Health of the Land: Previously Unpublished Essays and Other Writings on Conservation by Leopold, and of six reference works, including the two-volume A-Z *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy*. Baird is editor or co-editor and a contributor to 11 other multi-authored books. At the time of his WCHF induction, Baird is the author of 113 book chapters, 109 refereed journal articles, and 27 encyclopedia entries. He wrote the chapter titled "Conservation Values and Ethics" in all three editions of *Principles of Conservation Biology*, long the leading textbook in the field. He continues to serve *Conservation Biology* (the journal) as an assigning editor since 2000 and he has served numerous journals and book publishers as a referee.

In 2014, Baird was Visiting Senior Research Scientist at the National Socio-Environmental Synthesis Center (NSF DBI-1052875) in Annapolis Maryland. He was Bioethicist-in-Residence, visiting professor of philosophy, and visiting professor of forestry and environmental studies at Yale University during the 2003-04 academic year. Other stints as visiting professor include the University of Florida, the University of Hawai'i, the University of Kansas, the University of California-Santa Barbara, and James Cook University in Australia.

Baird was co-PI with Larry Crowder and Ed Crossman for "Examining the role of biodiversity in managing Great Lakes Fishery resources," a 3-year (1995-98)/\$300,000 grant from the Great Lakes Fishery Commission. He was co-PI with Miguel Acevedo and Michael Monticino on a research project titled "Biocomplexity: Integrating Models of Natural and Human Dynamics in Forest Landscapes Across Scales and Cultures" a 6-year (2002-08)/\$1.4m grant from the National Science Foundation program in Biocomplexity in the Environment: Coupled Natural and Human Systems (NSF CBH BCS-0216722).

In his 50-year career as a classroom teacher, Baird has taught conservation concepts, values, and ethics to thousands of undergraduate and dozens of graduate students. He has given 314 public lectures and talks for conference panels and plenary sessions in many other countries, as well as in the US, including three lecture tours of Taiwan and a book tour of Japan after the publication of the Japanese translation of *Earth's Insights*.

Baird's awards include the Wisconsin Library Association Outstanding Achievement Award for *Companion to A Sand County Almanac* (1988), Wisconsin Library Association Outstanding Achievement Award for *The River of the Mother of God* (1992), UWSP University Scholar Award (1995), and Society for the Study of Religion and Nature Lifetime Achievement Award (2016).

Among Baird's greatest honors is his 2025 induction into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame.

