

A Biophilic Life: Stephen R. Kellert 1943-2016

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The natural world and humanity have lost an important spokesperson. Stephen R. Kellert, Ph.D., passed away on November 26, 2016, with his family by his side after a long battle with multiple myeloma. He left behind a loving family, hundreds of mentees around the world, and a scholarly legacy that has benefited wildlife conservation and our understanding of the connection between humans and nature.

Steve was a world-class scholar. His official title was Tweedy Ordway Professor Emeritus of Social Ecology and Senior Research Scholar at the Yale University School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. However, students and colleagues around the world knew him as an extraordinary mentor and friend.

From a personal standpoint, Steve was an important person in my life. After receiving my degree in wildlife biology and becoming a wildlife biologist in 1982, I knew I wanted to not only work as a biologist, but also be involved in wildlife policy. I wanted to make a difference, and I felt the place to do it would be in the realm of people and policy. I had read the work of a professor at Yale who was involved with a groundbreaking study on understanding how the American public valued wildlife and connected with nature. I wrote to this professor to express my interest in his work – and this was in the day of snail mail – not really expecting to hear back from such an important person at an Ivy League university. I have to say I was surprised to quickly receive a kind and warm letter back from Steve inviting me to meet with him. I still have that letter 35 years later.

This correspondence resulted in Steve not only getting me into Yale, but also offering me two scholarships to study under him as a graduate student. From our first meeting, a lifelong friendship emerged.

Steve was a mentor through graduate school, helped secure my first job at the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and assisted me with starting and running my business, Responsive Management. He continued to be a mentor to me for 35 years, and we would talk often. He

always made the time to talk on the phone and answered emails within a few hours. This amazed me as he was such a busy person.

I share this because the real story is that Steve had similar relationships and gave his time and energy to hundreds of other students, colleagues, and friends around the world as well.

Steve was a quintessential academic. He started his career at Cornell University, where he earned his B.S., and then moved to Yale University for his Ph.D. He remained at Yale for his entire academic career. In the process, Steve authored or co-authored 11 books and 150 scientific articles. He influenced and transformed lives, mentoring hundreds of students throughout his career.

Steve's early research focused on Americans' attitudes toward wildlife and led to the development of a typology of how the public relates to wildlife. From there he conducted a wealth of related studies, examining how socio-demographics, outdoor recreation, and culture influence our relationships with nature. In addition to these pioneering studies, Steve conducted other studies on how people relate to wolves, bears, and cetaceans. Today, the wildlife profession takes for granted the importance of this type of research, now referred to as the "human dimensions of wildlife management." This was not the case 40 years ago. In a very real sense, an entire field grew up around Steve's work.

More recently – in fact, up until his passing – Steve was working with the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' Blue Ribbon Panel. This panel is working toward obtaining much needed funding for state fish and wildlife agencies. Steve was working with former director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and current president of the Wildlife Management Institute, Steve Williams, to address the relevancy of conservation to the American public. This work of Steve Kellert and Steve Williams has set in motion a discussion of the relevancy of fish and wildlife agencies for the next century and with it the wise management of our nation's fish and wildlife resources.

“A world made better for wildlife is necessarily a world made more attractive, meaningful, and inspiring for people. A sense of stewardship for wildlife and the land can provide opportunities for human growth, competence, and responsibility.” – Dr. Stephen Kellert



Steve Kellert loved to interact with wildlife in many different ways, from identifying songbirds in his backyard during spring migration to big game hunting in remote areas of North America. Pictured here is Steve (right) with his first caribou during a hunting trip in Northern Quebec with the author of this article, Mark Damian Duda.

In addition to his work with the Blue Ribbon Panel, Steve was also working on a national study and initiative to connect Americans and nature. The recommendations that flowed from this study are vital to the future of fish and wildlife management in the United States.

The common theme was Steve's passion to make conservation relevant to the American public. For wildlife conservation, it is highly relevant that Steve not only started his career contributing to the wildlife profession but that he circled back and ended there. The wildlife profession is tremendously better off because of his work.

For any other individual, this list of accomplishments and contributions to the wildlife profession would be an entire career. However, Steve's work and contributions did not end there. In fact, in thinking about Steve's impact on the way we think about the natural world, he had five major areas of impact and influence:

- Wildlife and human dimensions;
- Childhood development and children and nature;
- Biophilia;
- Biophilic design; and
- Nature and spirituality.

Following is a brief overview of Steve's influence in each of these areas.

Childhood Development: Children and Nature

Steve's interest in childhood development and the interaction of children with nature resulted in research that continues to inform and challenge education and child psychology theory. Steve identified the various stages of childhood development and connected them to the best ways to teach kids about nature. His work stimulated the redesign of how we teach kids about nature, and his 2002 book *Children and*

~ Biophilia is man's innate connection to the natural world. ~

Nature with Peter Kahn was a stimulus, not just for further research, but for a social movement to reintroduce children to the natural world.

Biophilia

Steve's third major area of influence was Biophilia.

Why are we attracted to beauty in nature? Why do we find flowers beautiful? Why would people rather look at flowers or green vegetation than buildings? Why, if given a choice, do people choose to camp near a lake, stream, or waterfall? Biophilia can be defined as man's innate connection to the natural world.

In the 1980s, Steve, and Edward O. Wilson of Harvard, advanced the emerging theory of Biophilia. Their book, *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, became a foundational work on integrating the worlds of people, philosophy, sociology, and psychiatry.

Biophilic Design

Steve's interest in Biophilia naturally resulted in its application to biophilic design. Biophilic design connects people and nature through the built environment. Research shows that people live healthier and happier lives, have deeper relationships with each other, and even heal faster when sick when working and living in environments that are constructed with nature in mind. It could be said that Steve influenced the entire architectural community to think differently. Steve's influence is evident in the design and structure of many buildings around the world, including the new School of Forestry and Environmental Studies at Yale, one of the greenest buildings in the nation.

Nature and Spirituality

In his last major area of influence, Steve sought to "determine whether a middle ground is possible in which scientific and spiritual outlooks of nature and humanity could be reconciled."

Not only writing extensively about this sub-

ject, Steve also co-created a joint program between Yale's Divinity School and Forestry School. His work on integrating nature and spirituality continues to inform and challenge institutions and individuals to rethink environmental ethics in such terms.

Dr. Stephen R. Kellert will be missed by people around the globe who care about the natural world. However, through his research, writings, teachings, mentorship, and friendships, we will remember a life devoted to not only helping the natural world but humanity itself. For as Steve pointed out, "If we stray too far from our inherited dependence on the natural world, we do so at our own peril."

The passing of an academic giant, mentor, and close friend is unsettling. We may only be consoled by the words of another great nature writer, Henry David Thoreau: "Even the death of friends will inspire us as much as their lives... their memories will be incrustated over with sublime and pleasing thoughts, as monuments of other men are overgrown with moss..."

2017 Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies Special Recognition Award

This award was presented posthumously to Dr. Stephen Kellert in recognition of his work as part of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Sustaining America's Diverse Fish & Wildlife. The Panel was tasked with developing recommendations and Congressional policy options on the most sustainable and equitable model to fund conservation of the full array of fish and wildlife species in our nation. Steve was a lead editor of the Panel's final report and co-chair of its working group on relevancy and agency transformation. He convincingly and persistently argued that relevancy and agency transformation were as important to fish and wildlife conservation as the need for increased funding. A long-time advocate of the need for increased funding for states to conserve all wildlife, he also advanced our understanding of the human side of wildlife management and the challenges that diverse attitudes toward wildlife bring. Dr. Kellert left an indelible mark on the members of the Panel. And, despite the many awards and distinctions he earned during his career, he remained humble, approachable, curious, and 100% committed to the cause of conservation.



Remembering a Friend and Champion

Dr. Stephen Kellert was no stranger to Blue Ribbon Panels. Long before he was asked to serve at the national level, Steve chaired the Connecticut Wildlife Conservation Committee, the Blue Ribbon Panel that helped establish Connecticut's Nonharvested Wildlife Program (now referred to as the DEEP Wildlife Division's Wildlife Diversity Program.) Joined by notables, such as Roger Tory Peterson, Noble Proctor, S. Dillon Ripley, and Rolland Clement, Steve guided the Committee to create an approach for developing a nongame wildlife program in Connecticut. Foreshadowing his national efforts, the ability to establish a stable source of funding for all wildlife was identified as a priority. Dr. Kellert eloquently noted that the committee "acted with the conviction and knowledge that a world made better for wildlife is necessarily a world made more attractive, meaningful, and inspiring for people. A sense of stewardship for wildlife and the land can provide opportunities for human growth, competence, and responsibility." It is definitely a legacy that will live on in Connecticut, and beyond, for many generations to come.