

*In January 2008, Carlton N. Owen addressed the Society of American Foresters Appalachian Chapter Meeting in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. He urged his audience to consider the type of legacy that they would leave behind in their professional and personal lives. Owen has spent more than 30 years as a professional conservationist working both for industry and the environmental movement. He is currently president and CEO of the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities, Inc.*

# SUCCESS OR SIGNIFICANCE?

## LEAVING A LEGACY

**T**here are several environmental issues the forestry community should address now, including rapid population growth, climate change, globalization, rapid forest ownership changes, and exotic pests and their threats to natural ecosystems. And there are organizations and ways to address them,

such as through the newly chartered U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities and our vision for advancing sustainable forestry and the needs of America's forest-reliant communities.

When legislators or others in power hear a single message from dozens of sources, positive action is possible. However, when they hear differing or conflicting messages from a single sector, they have an excuse either to take no action or to do anything they wish.

I'd suggest that all we need to do to understand our impact (or perhaps lack thereof) as a profession is to begin counting the number of associations that represent forestry at the local, state, regional, or national level. I'm told by Kelly McCloskey of the Wood Is Good Network that there are between 320 and 340 associations that purport to speak for forestry and forest products across North America. For each additional organization "representing" the sector, the messages are exponentially multiplied and confused. The Bible says that where two or more gather in God's name, He is there. Perhaps the forestry corollary is that

where two or more natural resources professionals gather, a new association is born.

### MEASURES OF LEADERSHIP

I want to suggest that instead of looking to associations for leadership and risking not being heard above the din, we think about a very different aspect of leadership. The concept is that wherever you are and whatever your age or influence, you do one of the most lasting things that a leader can—that is, to leave a legacy. Legacy is defined as "money or property bequeathed to another" or "something handed down from an ancestor or predecessor." Another way to say it would be to "leave every organization you are a part of better than you found it." That could be either financially, or in terms of effectiveness, conservation outputs, service, or attitude. Of course, there is the "legacy tree" in forestry vernacular—the old and perhaps dying tree.

In his book *Half Time*, Bob Buford speaks of nearing middle

BY CARLTON N. OWEN

age and having the desire to move from success to significance. While I agree with his premise, I believe that each of us, regardless of age or position, can choose to focus on significance in our lives without waiting for some time in the distant future.

## LEAVING A LEGACY

I'd like to look at my own career of thirty-five years in natural resources and mention a few outcomes for examples of the opportunities that we may face and the variety of legacies that each of us can leave. I'll do this by sharing four lessons and examples of how each played out in my life.

Lesson 1: *Leave the organization you are with in better condition than when you got there.* My first example goes back to my very first professional position—executive director of a small environmental nonprofit, the Mississippi Wildlife Federation (MWF). By title, I was a leader. But more importantly, I would hope history would judge that I used my two short years there to leave a legacy. There were many important conservation battles and initiatives during my time at MWF, but perhaps my most lasting legacy could be seen in the organization's finances. When I arrived, MWF was in debt and could not meet its monthly bills. Twenty-four months later, the debt was gone; revenues had doubled and we had instituted a long-term financial plan through a life membership campaign that boasted \$100,000 in cash reserves. Needless to say, while those who followed might not have had an easy time, the foundation upon which they built to leave their own legacy was more sound than what I found upon my arrival.

Lesson 2: *Do all you can to instill a conservation ethic and help turn the light of positive publicity on your employer.* As the first wildlife biologist in the Potlatch Corporation's history, I worked in Arkansas for the state's fourth-largest forest products producer and landowner. The late 1970s and early 1980s were a time of environmental awakening in a very traditional industry. When I left, the company had a formal and credible plan to identify and manage a very significant population of endangered red-cockaded woodpeckers. After I left the company, it was my pleasure to nominate and secure recognition for Potlatch as the Arkansas Wildlife Federation's Forest Conservationist of the Year in 1986. I would like to believe that the small legacy of my tenure at Potlatch helped prepare the soil for further environmental growth and leadership.

Lesson 3: *Invest in future professionals by taking time to give back to your profession.* One of my first acts with the U.S. Endowment was instituting a formal internship program. Not only do we gain valuable help on key projects at very cost-effective rates, but we also have the chance to share a window on professional activity with fresh minds and hearts. Even if you can't bring students into an on-the-job learning environment, you can make yourself available for networking, mentoring, and simply sharing conversations one-on-one. As Rick Warren says in his book, *Better Together*, "Life is too short to learn everything by experience."

Lesson 4: *Take a personal and direct role in promoting and living more sustainably.* I ended my decade at Champion International with an executive leadership position as vice president of forest policy, with global responsibility. I count as one of my legacies a project in the Brazilian state of Amapa near the mouth of the Amazon. When the company completed a multiyear worldwide study of potential forest plantation areas, we settled on Brazil—



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Carlton N. Owen

a country where we had a half-century of experience. But none of that experience was in the Amazon. The company ultimately purchased more than 1 million acres—agreeing voluntarily to set aside not only all rainforest segments but also several significant cerrados, or grassland reserves, which are far more endangered in Brazil than are rainforests. The conservation plan was the product of the largest private rapid ecological assessment ever conducted. It was recommended and overseen by an independent international advisory council that we put in place. That land today is targeted two-thirds for conservation and one-third for plantation—a model of private forest conservation and sustainable development that has few equals.

Let me offer one additional example of creating a legacy. This comes from my consulting practice—The Environmental Edge—yet is part of my commitment during those years to give half my time to not-for-profit causes. This work was done on behalf of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), where I served as vice chairman of the board of directors.

Weary of simplistic arguments and debates about sprawl and development and the resulting loss of open space and wildlife habitats, I set about developing and attempting to market a model that would link conservation with continued growth. With the aid of a fellow board member with ties to the Sam Walton family, we pitched a rather simple idea to Lee Scott, president of Walmart: make the world's largest corporation the first company in the world to offset its entire development footprint—buildings,

parking lots, offices, and distribution centers—with conserved lands, acre for acre.

We started with an idea that would have the company do this over ten years for all of its U.S. operations—addressing historic, current, and future growth. NFWF committed to match Wal-Mart at least \$1 for \$1 in an effort to use conservation easements to achieve the goal. With Wal-Mart's pledge of \$35 million over ten years, NFWF launched what will likely be a \$100 million project entitled Acres for America.

Our ten-year goal was to offset 138,000 acres of development. In the first year, pulling funds forward from the second year, we and our conservation partners badly missed our goal of addressing perhaps 20 percent of the company's development footprint. In fact, through projects in Maine, Arkansas, Louisiana, Arizona, and Oregon, we achieved not 20 percent but 230 percent of our original ten-year goal—conserving more than 322,000 acres. I'm pleased to say that Wal-Mart didn't back away from the commitment; they are excited about seeing just how much land can be conserved under their original pledge, and today more than 400,000 acres has been protected under the program.

While I am personally proud of each of these legacies, I acknowledge that none were mine alone. Great team support and not a little divine intervention were involved in each.

Let me end by discussing something even more personal. That is how we each live day to day. It gets very personal when we speak about our consumption patterns, the cars we drive, the homes we live in. Do we all really need four-wheel-drive SUVs when most of us live in urban environments? Are four-thousand- or five-thousand-square-foot homes really necessary to live comfortably?

I joined the board of a startup nonprofit in Greenville, South Carolina, in 1999. Its goal was to address sensible growth and protection of special places in the Upstate. As the token Republican on the board, I urged our group not to be just another typical nonprofit that preaches and rails against societal abuse. I urged that we walk our talk. As part of that suggestion, I pledged for my family to be the guinea pigs for a living example of more sustainable development and living. What resulted some five years later was Upstate House—our home in Greenville—that brought the first-ever green building standard to South Carolina.

My wife and I are enjoying our new downsized home—we've

gone from thirty-six hundred to twenty-five hundred square feet of living space. I now walk one block to work or six or eight blocks to dinner and the theater. Our energy bills average \$50 a month. But more importantly, through a partnership with the city, the state, and the homebuilders, we're seeing entire developments of "green" homes built across South Carolina. Again, we can't take credit for all of this—Iran and Iraq get some credit for finally waking up people to the need to be a bit more energy sensitive as oil prices hit \$100 per barrel and beyond. But again, it's all part of leaving a legacy.

It might best be summed up by that old saw: I can't hear what you are saying for the way you are living.

## CONCLUSION

My message is that we should not view leadership based just upon budgets and numbers of employees or any other traditional measures alone. While each is fine, the real judgment about leadership will be seen in the legacies each of us leaves. It's also something that, unlike legacy trees, you don't have to wait decades to see.

Let me leave you with six challenges or questions to consider, regardless of your age, position, or perceived power:

- What are you doing to ensure that your organization—whether a university, company, not-for-profit, or agency—will be stronger and more effective because of your service?
- What are you doing to instill a true conservation ethic in your organization—and bring positive attention to that lifestyle commitment?
- What are you doing to live more sustainably?
- What are you doing to invest in the future of the profession with a student or new graduate?
- What are you doing to tangibly leave the world's natural resources better than in your time?
- Finally, what are you doing to move from success to significance?

We speak of legacy trees—those relics left from a former time. They add value and diversity to managed forests. We speak of leaving a legacy to our children in terms of an inheritance or values. Most of us will never be mentioned alongside the likes of Pinchot, Leopold, or Muir. But we each can leave a legacy. □

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