

Environmental visionary Raymond F. Dasmann dies at 83

November 05, 2002

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Portrait from “Raymond F. Dasmann: A Life in Conservation Biology”
an Oral Interview conducted by Randall Jarrell, 2000.

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Raymond F. Dasmann, a founder of international environmentalism and a professor emeritus of ecology at UC Santa Cruz, died Tuesday, November 5, in Santa Cruz. Dasmann had been in ill health for several years. The cause of death was pneumonia. He was 83.

Dasmann was the author of more than a dozen books, including *The Destruction of California* (1965), *Environmental Conservation* (fifth edition 1984), *Wildlife Biology* (second edition 1981), and *California's Changing Environment* (1981). A visionary environmentalist, Dasmann began working as a conservation biologist in the 1950s when the field was just emerging, identifying the major threats of population growth, pollution, habitat loss, and species eradication that would become the focus of international conservation efforts for decades to come.

Dasmann made an impassioned plea for sustainability on a planet with limited resources. In addition to his academic career, Dasmann did pioneering work in the 1960s with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), where he helped launch the Man and the Biosphere program. For most of the 1970s, he worked in Switzerland as a senior ecologist for the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

Dasmann's efforts earned him many major international awards, including the top conservation medals of the World Wildlife Society and the Smithsonian Institution. The prestigious Order of the Golden Ark, which recognizes the world's most distinguished conservationists, was bestowed on Dasmann by the Dutch government in 1978. He became an elected fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1984 and received the Distinguished Service Award from the Society for Conservation Biology in 1988.

Born in San Francisco, Dasmann was fascinated by wildlife from an early age. His college education in biology was interrupted by World War II; he served in New Guinea and Australia,

where he met his wife of 45 years, Elizabeth Sheldon. Soon after his return to the United States, Dasmann enrolled at UC Berkeley to study zoology under famed wildlife biologist Starker Leopold. He received his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. from Berkeley, and in 1954 embarked on a distinguished career in teaching, research, and public service. Other than a brief appointment at the University of Minnesota, Dasmann's academic roots remained planted in California soil. He was a professor of wildlife management at Humboldt State University for eight years before joining the faculty at UC Santa Cruz in 1977. He retired from UCSC in 1989.

Dasmann's talent for outstanding scientific research was matched by his desire to change the world. A gifted writer, Dasmann was equally at home in the field, the classroom, and the policy arena. He translated his passion for nature into a vision of planet preservation years before the public began to grapple with concepts like conservation and overpopulation.

Dasmann's research took him to Africa, Sri Lanka, the Caribbean, and California. He was an early advocate of conservation policies that respected the knowledge and circumstances of indigenous people, and his early call for a vision of bioregionalism that minimized human impact on the land helped lay the groundwork for the field of environmental ethics. Dasmann fought for the title of his influential text *Environmental Conservation* at a time when the phrase was unknown, and his pioneering work on game ranching in Africa fostered the field of ecodevelopment and helped make ecotourism a household word.

Earlier this year, Dasmann published his memoir, *Called by the Wild: The Autobiography of a Conservationist* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, Press, 2002). The book reflects Dasmann's desire to give credit to others, but in fact Dasmann is one of a handful of visionaries who gave life to the worldwide environmental movement.

Although informed by complex scientific observations, Dasmann's vision of conservation was based on one simple fact: Resources are finite. Yet successful conservation strategies aren't simple, and Dasmann always fought for policies that took into account the full complexities of biology. At the Conservation Foundation, he recalled recently, a senior official was always chastising Dasmann, saying "Dammit, Dasmann, you keep making things too complicated! We're just trying to get some land set aside, and you keep adding all these complications!"

The public-relations challenges environmentalists face today are similar to those Dasmann faced as a graduate student studying deer populations in northern California. Despite convincing data that predicted a population crash unless the number of deer was reduced, preferably by liberalizing hunting regulations, Dasmann and his colleagues were unable to build the necessary public support among deer hunters, who believed a doe hunt would lead to extinction. As a result, the deer population did indeed crash in the mid-1960s.

For Dasmann, like many scientific researchers committed to using research to inform public policy, the challenge of swaying public opinion persisted throughout his career. There was little satisfaction in being able to say, "I told you so."

"I'm not much for tying myself to trees or putting sand in gasoline tanks, but my feeling is that we need some fairly radical social and economic restructuring to address some of these issues," Dasmann said during a 1989 interview. "I'm a tentative optimist, but I can't see any rational basis for my optimism sometimes."

Dasmann's most recent efforts focused on creation of the [Golden Gate Biosphere Reserve \(GGBR\)](#), one of 300 international sites designated by the United Nations for protection and access. The GGBR consists of more than two million acres that extend from the Bodega Marine Laboratory north of San Francisco to Jasper Ridge near Stanford University and 30 miles

offshore to the edge of the Continental Shelf. The reserve is managed by nine separate entities, each of which helps protect the wide variety of native species and natural habitats that characterize the coastal region of central California while offering recreational and educational opportunities for many millions of visitors.

Dasmann is survived by his daughters Marlene Dasmann of Santa Cruz, Sandra Dasmann of Santa Cruz, and Lauren Chamberlain of Tucson, Arizona; five grandchildren; and one great-grandchild. His wife, Elizabeth Sheldon Dasmann, died in 1996.

DR. RAYMOND F. DASMANN

No services have been held for Dr. Raymond F. Dasmann, 83, who passed away in Santa Cruz, CA on November 5, 2002. The cause was pneumonia. Dr. Dasmann was a veteran of foreign wars, fighting in the Pacific Ocean during WWII. He was a University of California Santa Cruz Professor Emeritus of Ecology, former Provost of College 8, and former Department Chairman of Environmental Studies. He was one of the founding fathers of the environmental movement. He fought for over 50 years to save the earth's wild lands and endangered species. He worked with the United Nations, the Conservation Foundation and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. Dr. Dasmann was the author of many books in the field of conservation Biology.

Dr. Dasmann is survived by his 3 daughters: Sandra and Marlene Dasmann of Santa Cruz and Laura Chamberlain, of Tucson, Arizona; 5 grandchildren, and one great grandchild. His wife of 52 years, Elizabeth Sheldon, died in 1996.

A memorial service is pending. Contributions in Dr. Dasmann's memory can be sent to the attention of Lia Hall, Golden Gate Biosphere Reserve Association, Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305-5020.

Source: Santa Cruz Sentinel 10 Nov 2002 18:4-5

From the Foreword to *Raymond F. Dasmann: A Life in Conservation Biology*

Ray Dasmann A Different Kind of Person

The floors of the old headquarters of IUCN in Morges, Switzerland, creaked, and the sloping roof window in the third floor closet-like office where I worked let in both needed air and, when I forgot to close it, also the rain. But it was a friendly place to compose, and that is what I was there to do. Outlines for marine conservation, often a bit damp, shuffled to and from the Deputy Director's office, until finally one seemed to offer promise. I was summoned and so was Senior Scientist Dr. Raymond F. Dasmann. He was a legend to me, due to my having studied his work on deer at Berkeley under Starker Leopold, also Ray's mentor. So, I thought I heard my knees creak in harmony with the stairs as I descended. But there opposite the Deputy Director sat a friendly face, somewhat slumped in a chair. The former spoke at some length, as I recall, then turned to Ray for an opinion. Simply a nod: "Sounds good. Lets's do it," came the reply, launching IUCN's Marine Programme—and more, a friendship of about three decades at this writing.

Insightful, laconic wisdom, I soon learned, was the gift of this different kind of person. I spent many an evening with him and his equally impressive and expressive wife, Beth, talking, always laughing, as we sipped old fashions and nibbled on peanuts, and then at dinner. I always came away with thoughts ringing in my head, but also a bit too much good food and wine to recall all the stories and laughter with precision. The conversations seemed to search for “the big things that count.” And Ray constantly reminded us of those, and invented more than a few. The International Biological Programme was busy developing modern ecosystem ecology in the 1960s to early 1970s, in the early days of computers and satellite imagery. A portion of the IBP was the “conservation of ecosystems” program. That program might have stopped right there, and were it not for Ray, the “biosphere reserve” concept might not have been conceived or flourished.

Those were also the days when “protectionist” conservation was being recognized as deficient. The eventual outcome was the debatable concept of “sustainable development.” But before that, Ray innovated the more lucid, non-political, and universally applicable idea expressed simply as “ecodevelopment.” He envisaged human societies as having evolved from “ecosystem people” to urbanized “biosphere people.” The inevitable result has been that humans have become divorced from their immediate environment, as the footprint of urban centers continues to extend worldwide, and as realities of nature have become values derived more from marketing than experience. The impact on conservation has been fundamental.

Ray recognized the conflict that emerges when people are divorced from their source, and expressed it in his writings. He retains faith in native peoples, and although modern anthropology is showing that humans have always tended to over-exploit their world, the fundamentals of “ecosystem people,” not some technological fix, remain as our best hope for an enlightened and sustainable future. The Easter Island story may be a microcosm of the human future on this Earth, but if we would listen to Ray, this inevitability may yet have a chance to be avoided. His forecast for Florida, *No Further Retreat*, said it all.

So many eminent persons are credited with inventing new wheels, only to find that their predecessors were the originals. Ray is surely one of those, way ahead—even too far ahead—of his time. While seeking the “big things that count,” his perception of the “little things” was as significant. Diversity, social or bio-, is a hot topic nowadays, and that is where a lot of little things really count. Ray saw the emerging problem clearly in his 1968 classic, *A Different Kind of Country*, in which he gave his impression of one city’s attempt at renovation:

“After spending an hour or more examining the wonders of this new city center I felt depressed—by the absence of people and of life except for trees, shrubs, and flowers growing in greater or lesser concrete pots. I moved to what was left of old Philadelphia, into the narrow streets, the dirty old converted town houses, the jumble of shops and theaters and the mixtures of older taller buildings. Here, and not in the new malls, was where the people were—crowding the sidewalks, moving into theaters or pubs, traveling to or from church, window-shopping. I ate lunch in the back of an old delicatessen and worried about the future.”

So should we all!

G. Carleton Ray
August 2000