

March 9, 2010

Edgar Wayburn, a Leader in Saving the Wilderness, Dies at 103

By **DOUGLAS MARTIN**

Edgar Wayburn, a physician who joined the [Sierra Club](#) to take a burro trip and then went on to become a major figure in the conservation movement, leading campaigns that preserved more than 100 million wild acres, died Friday at his home in San Francisco. He was 103.

In announcing his death, the [Sierra Club](#) called Dr. Wayburn “the 20th-century John Muir,” referring to its founder, who preserved the Yosemite Valley.

When President [Bill Clinton](#) awarded Dr. Wayburn the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1999, he said Dr. Wayburn had “saved more of our wilderness than any other person alive.”

Dr. Wayburn had central roles in protecting 104 million acres of Alaskan wilderness; establishing and enlarging Redwood National Park and Point Reyes National Seashore in California; and starting the Golden Gate National Recreation Area in and around San Francisco.

His methods were the old-fashioned ones of writing letters, raising money, commenting on environmental studies and attending public hearings. He was widely respected for the authority and persistence he brought to lobbying public officials, always softly, with a courtly Georgia accent.

“Legislators know that if Dr. Wayburn comes into your office, what might have been inconceivable at the beginning of the conversation is inevitable by the end of it,” Representative [Nancy Pelosi](#), now the speaker of the House, told *Sierra* magazine in 1999.

Dr. Wayburn helped transform the Sierra Club from the 3,000-member outing and skiing club he joined in 1939 into a powerful force in environmentalism today with 730,000 members. He served five one-year terms as president of the club in the 1960s and for many years was honorary president.

As a physician who made house calls, Dr. Wayburn addressed his environmental mission mainly in the evenings and on weekends and vacations, never accepting remuneration. And he did it without the renown of Sierra Club figures like David Brower and [Ansel Adams](#), who were often at odds. In fact, Dr. Wayburn was credited with refereeing their disputes and keeping the organization from fracturing.

Dr. Wayburn insisted that he would have accomplished nothing without the help of the former Peggy Elliott, whom he took hiking on their first date in 1947. After marrying six months later, the couple went on to

spread maps on the floor of the secretary of interior's office to suggest boundaries for the Redwood National Park they envisioned.

In 1967, during their first of many vacations in Alaska, they encountered growling grizzlies and proposed 10 pristine areas as national parks. With the passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980, these and many other Wayburn recommendations became law.

Mrs. Wayburn, who wrote widely on conservation, died in 2002. Dr. Wayburn is survived by his daughters, Cynthia, Diana and Laurie; his son, William; and three grandchildren.

Edgar Wayburn was born in Macon, Ga., on Sept. 17, 1906, and grew up devouring nature books. His mother was from San Francisco, and as a child he visited the city every summer. He graduated from the [University of Georgia](#) at 19 and from Harvard Medical School at 23 before returning to California to practice medicine.

Dr. Wayburn joined the Sierra Club in 1939 to participate in a trip into northern Yosemite in which burros were used to carry supplies. After wartime service in England as a doctor with the Army Air Forces, he returned to San Francisco and was elected to the executive committee of the local Sierra Club chapter and started its first conservation committee.

His goal was to keep jewels of nature from being paved over or turned into housing tracts in the postwar boom. In a 1985 oral history, he called himself a "wild-eyed advocate of large public acquisition." He started with Mount Tamalpais State Park in Marin County and in the next quarter century helped increase it sevenfold.

His case was as much moral as aesthetic.

"In destroying wilderness," he wrote in his autobiography, "we deny ourselves the full extent of what it means to be alive."

Dr. Wayburn practiced medicine for more than 50 years; taught at the medical schools of the [University of California, Berkeley](#), and [Stanford University](#); and was president of the San Francisco Medical Society. His many awards for conservation work included the Albert Schweitzer Prize for Humanitarianism in 1995.

After receiving the Medal of Freedom, according to many accounts, Dr. Wayburn seized Mr. Clinton's hand in a vise-like grip and proceeded to tell the president of the many wild places his administration had failed to protect.