

Conservation Award Presented to AOK Executive Director

Michael L. Donnelly

Ron Klataske, Executive Director of Audubon of Kansas (AOK), was recently honored for an impressive list of achievements in the cause of conservation by the “President’s Award” from the Western Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA). The award recognizes fifty years of service dedicated to conservation of wildlife and native ecosystems during Ron’s tenure as a regional representative and vice president for the National Audubon Society from 1970 to 1998, and as one of the prime movers in the creation and activities of Audubon of Kansas since 1999.

Among Ron’s many achievements, perhaps two are most significant in their national impact. They resulted in new units of the National Park system. One involved developing a proposal and working with landowners and Congress over an eleven year period to secure protection of a 76-mile stretch of the Niobrara River in north-central Nebraska as a National Scenic River. Another involved proposing and fighting for the establishment of the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve in the Kansas Flint Hills, established as a unit of the National Park system by congressional action on November 12, 1996 after a decades-long effort. Earlier, he also proposed and was one of the earliest proponents of the creation of the Konza Prairie south of Manhattan and purchase of the 30,000-acre Barnard Ranch to establish a Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in Oklahoma.

He led Audubon campaigns opposing dam and diversion projects on the Platte and Niobrara Rivers in Nebraska. The campaign to stop the Mid-State Reclamation Project—which would have been the death knell for the Platte—succeeded in 1975 with a local referendum vote which eliminated tax funding for the sponsoring entity. The proposed Norden Dam on the Niobrara was stalled in Congress with opposition to federal funding, and then the victory was capped with designation of the Niobrara as a national scenic river.

The campaigns to protect instream flows and riverine habitats from the adverse impacts of additional dams and diversions upstream in the vast Platte River watershed involved numerous Audubon activities at many levels, and it is arguably one of the



Ron Klataske Receives Conservation Award - by Ryan Klataske

most ecologically significant Audubon contributions in the central Great Plains. In 1971, Ron organized the first Audubon event to encourage people to experience the spring staging of nearly a half million Sandhill Cranes along and on the river. That was followed by organization of annual Spring River Conferences and Crane Festivals that continue to this day. He also worked with landowners to acquire property for establishment of the Lillian Annette Rowe Sanctuary. Along with all of the outreach conducted by the sanctuary and the Iain Nicolson Audubon Center, those events have helped immensely to raise public awareness and make the gathering of cranes on their early spring epic migration one of Nebraska’s greatest wildlife tourism attractions.

Although his vision for many of the conservation initiatives and his tenacity for advocacy over decades have been vital for favorable outcomes, he is uncomfortable receiving awards. He stresses that in all cases the dedication, involvement and support of others, often a great many others, has been equally or more important and crucial to successes. Many “partners in conservation” have worked in tandem with Ron since the early 1970s. He cites the late Larry Haverfield and Gordon Barnhardt—who fought to retain prairie dog colonies during the past fifteen years and who have hosted reintroduction of Black-footed Ferrets on their land against extraordinary opposition by anti-wildlife forces—as examples of heroic partners that make all of us proud and our organizations look good.



Conservation Award Presented to Ron Klataske by Brad Loveless - by Ryan Klataske

Pushing for repeal of state statutes that allow county commissioners to mandate poisoning of prairie dog colonies on private land is one of the pillars of AOK's advocacy. Prairie dogs are a keystone species vital for the survival of Black-footed Ferrets in the wild, and important for many other short-grass prairie species.

While still working for the National Audubon Society, Ron presciently proposed creating trail systems on flood control levees north of the Kansas River in Lawrence, and later the similarly situated linear trail in Manhattan. Both are now popular walking, hiking, and bike trails, bringing a larger segment of the population into closer contact with nature.

The AOK system of sanctuaries, at present consisting of the 5,000-acre Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary along the Niobrara (a gift from Harold and Lucille Hutton), the Mt. Mitchell Heritage Prairie south of Wamego, and the Connie Achterberg Wildlife-Friendly Demonstration Farm in Lincoln County, represents the fruition of another of Ron's creative dreams for Kansas and beyond. With this state's comparative dearth of public lands, he envisioned an archipelago of both wildlife preserves and publically available sites demonstrating economically feasible wildlife-and-nature-friendly agricultural practices. The concept is based on the model of a sanctuary system and education centers established by the Massachusetts Audubon Society during the past 120 years! Additional AOK sanctuaries are planned.

Ron has been a tireless advocate for conservation before legislatures and administrative agencies, serving as a persistent presence pushing sometimes slow-moving bureaucracies. He

has played a central role in pressing for control and eradication—to the extent possible—of invasive plants like Old-World Bluestems, which threaten native prairies and rangelands. For the past twenty years he has worked closely with Kansas Department of Transportation officials to reduce non-essential mowing and implement limited mowing policies for 150,000 acres of highway roadsides, and planting of native grasses and wildflowers when areas are reseeded. This has been part of AOK's more comprehensive effort to enhance and establish pollinator habitat.

He recently made the case for restricted trapping of river otters in areas where their populations are struggling to reestablish themselves, and he has been a voice on behalf of declining populations of Lesser and Greater Prairie-Chickens (the iconic bird on the AOK logo). Whenever opportunity for education or intervention in the cause of conservation in the central plains has presented itself, or a threat arisen, Ron's expertise, time, and indefatigable efforts have gone into action, presenting scientific facts and sound policy alternatives to stakeholder groups, government agencies, local authorities, and the larger public.

Ron's award for a half century of achievement in the cause of conservation was presented by Brad Loveless, Secretary of the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks, and Tourism and current president of WAFWA (Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies) at its 2019 Summer Meeting held in Manhattan, July 11-16, 2019. WAFWA represents 19 state wildlife agencies from the U.S. and five Canadian provinces.