



The Legacy of Ralph W. Abele

by Linda Steiner

Ralph W. Abele was a larger-than-life individual. Executive director of the (then) Pennsylvania Fish Commission from 1972-1987, Abele made an indelible mark on conservation, especially water resources and fisheries, that goes beyond state boundaries. His accomplishments, and those of the individuals he inspired, on behalf of the environment continue to reverberate. As more challenges arise to protecting our clean waters and restoring degraded aquatic resources, a new generation needs to be enlisted to keep Abele's legacy vital for the future.

Although they enjoy the benefits of his work, many who fish and boat in Pennsylvania today were not around when Abele was influencing the state's natural resource agencies. Abele was born into another world, the early 1920s. Our country was emerging post-Industrial Revolution, blinking its eyes and realizing that its rivers, which once held the nation's lifeblood of clean water, were becoming conduits of poisons.

As a youngster in southwestern Pennsylvania, the growing conservation movement inspired Abele. He took to heart the books of Aldo Leopold, including *A Sand County Almanac*, and the natural history writer Ernest Thompson Seton, later saying he "always tried to emulate them." In doing so, Abele became involved with the Boy Scouts.



During one of President Jimmy Carter's fishing trips to Pennsylvania, Ralph pins Complimentary License #1 on him and is reported to have told him, "You're all right, even if you are a Democrat."



Ralph is pictured above with Edward R. Miller, Director, Bureau of Engineering (center), and Senator Wayne Ewing.

After high school, Abele studied for a career as a petroleum engineer, something that later seemed paradoxical, and served in World War II. He returned to Pittsburgh after the war and settled into marriage and a family. A job as a food broker was counter-pointed by his return to scouting, as a troop leader. Influencing that era's younger generation, Abele imparted a conservation message that the land is ours only to nurture and to pass on to the future.

The world spun on and by the end of the 1960s, along with hippies and Woodstock, ecology became a battle cry. Concern for the environment wasn't a mere counterculture youth trend. Reversing the tide of pollution and working toward a cleaner future was also coming to the forefront for those in the "establishment," including Abele.

Now at midlife, Abele had the experience, position and passion to make a difference. He was at the State Capitol building in Harrisburg, working full-time for conservation. Abele made his first splash as executive secretary of the Joint Legislative Air and Water Pollution Control and Conservation Committee of the House and Senate (Pennsylvania General Assembly). He helped craft important legislation to protect and improve natural



Two giants of conservation: Dr. Maurice Goddard and Ralph W. Abele.

resources and the environment, including the Clean Water Amendments and the Clean Air Act.

Most Pennsylvanians believe they have "a right to clean air and pure water." But until that wording was added to the Commonwealth's Constitution, they could not insist on it. Abele was a primary author of the 1971 Conservation Amendment (Article 1, Section 27), which goes on to say: "Pennsylvania's public natural resources are the common property of all the people, including generations yet to come."

The amendment also gives Pennsylvania's government a task: "As trustees of these resources, the Commonwealth shall conserve and maintain them for the benefit of all the people." In Abele's next job, he put those words directly into action. In 1972, he was appointed executive director of the Pennsylvania Fish Commission, a position he held until his retirement in 1987.

What Abele accomplished during his time there remains legendary. A *Philadelphia Inquirer* newspaper story a decade after he took over summed it up as: "Ralph Abele ... has taken the Fish Commission, which used to be a sleepy little bureaucracy ... and made it into the most militant and powerful agency still pushing to clean up Pennsylvania's streams."



Ralph taught about the wonders of nature and instilled a conservation ethic in young minds with his message that the land is ours only to nurture and pass on to future generations.



(Left to right) Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission executive staff in the late 1980s—Edward R. Miller, Director, Bureau of Engineering; Paul F. O'Brien, Director, Bureau of Administrative Services; A. E. Sporn, Assistant Executive Director; Cheryl K. Riley, Director, Bureau of Education and Information; Dennis T. Guise, Chief Counsel; Ralph W. Abele, Executive Director; Delano Graff, Director, Bureau of Fisheries; and Edward W. Manhart, Director, Bureau of Law Enforcement.

In redirecting the Fish Commission, Abele implemented long-held beliefs. “If the fish can’t survive in the water, there are serious problems for man,” he was quoted as saying. In cleaning up fouled waters and protecting still-clean streams and lakes, he went up against powerful interests, especially in industry and mining. Those who knew him say that Abele didn’t hesitate to take on anyone in a conservation cause he believed was right.

“Do your duty and fear no one,” was one of Abele’s best-known sayings. He lived that mantra and encouraged others to do likewise. Tough and opinionated, he knew how to get things done in and out of the sphere of government. With bulldog tenacity, Abele took on strip mine and acid rain pollution, fought an ill-conceived plan to heighten the Dock Street Dam in Harrisburg and started the restoration of the Susquehanna basin historic shad run.

Within the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC), Abele’s many accomplishments include introducing the “Resource First” philosophy, which still guides the agency today. Resource First is the “belief that the Commonwealth’s aquatic resources are the valuable collateral that secures all fishing and boating activities. The notion that protecting, conserving and enhancing (them) is the agency’s first management priority.” Clean water comes first, Abele might have said, and from that the fish and the fishing and boating will follow.

Although Abele passed away on June 15, 1990, his influence remains, not only in improved waterways and

fisheries, but also in the part he had in shaping the hearts, minds and activities of Pennsylvanians who made and are making a difference for the environment. The list of recipients of the PFBC’s Ralph W. Abele Conservation Heritage Award, instituted in his memory, reads like a “who’s who” of champions for natural resources: Ken Sink, Dr. Maurice Goddard, Dr. William Kodrich, Leonard A. Green, Peter S. Duncan, Enoch S. (“Inky”) Moore, Dr. Ed Bellis, William E. Sharpe, Larry J. Schweiger and others.

Schweiger is among the award recipients who knew Abele personally. A former Pittsburgher and currently president and CEO of the National Wildlife Federation, Schweiger says, “When I face tough choices, I often ask myself: What would Ralph do at this moment? I find my answer in his writings or in the words he spoke to me long ago: ‘Mankind is not an island...in respect to other men or to other living things, nor even in respect to the nonliving and inorganic creations.’”

PFBC Executive Director John Arway was also a protégé of Ralph W. Abele. One of Abele’s rallying quotes was, “It’s later than it’s ever been,” and Arway would agree with that.

“A lot of the things that Ralph fought for may not be the same as today,” says Arway. “For example, we’re doing a better job with coal today. Now it’s Marcellus Shale and the challenge of understanding that we have a finite amount of water in the East. We are looking at how to supply industry and people and protect fish; that’s what’s on the horizon. It’s up to us to define in today’s terms that duty Ralph talked about.”

How can we rededicate ourselves to the conservation ethic that defined and motivated Abele?

Through the newly initiated Ralph W. Abele Legacy Project and “Abele’s Army,” says Frank Felbaum, president of the Ralph W. Abele Conservation Scholarship Fund. Felbaum says the fund’s board is spearheading the effort, but more folks are welcome to join in.

“The ‘Abele’s Army’ concept is just being formulated,” says Felbaum. “Knowing Ralph’s commitment to education, we’ll be using that idea to get kids involved, coax them outdoors and be involved with aquatic resources. We want the youngsters to be the eyes and ears of natural resources in the Commonwealth; it’s their future.”

This will mean mentoring and guiding today’s younger generation as Abele himself did. To find out how you or your group can become involved, contact Frank Felbaum through the Ralph W. Abele Legacy Project:

Ralph W. Abele Legacy Project
c/o Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission
P.O. Box 67000
Harrisburg, PA 17106-7000



photo-courtesy of Dennis Gaise

(Left to right) Delano Graff, Ralph Abele, Senator Alan Simpson, Ken Sink and Senator John Heinz during a fly fishing trip.



The Ralph W. Abele Conservation Heritage Award

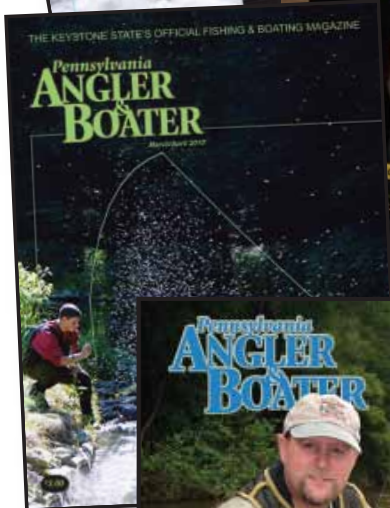
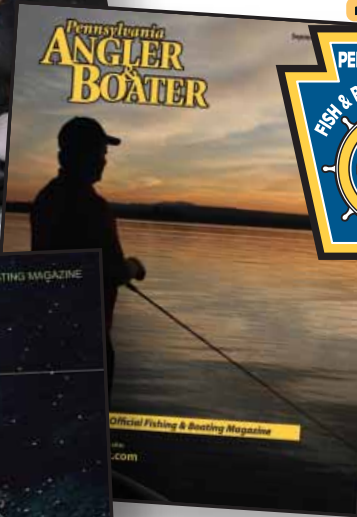
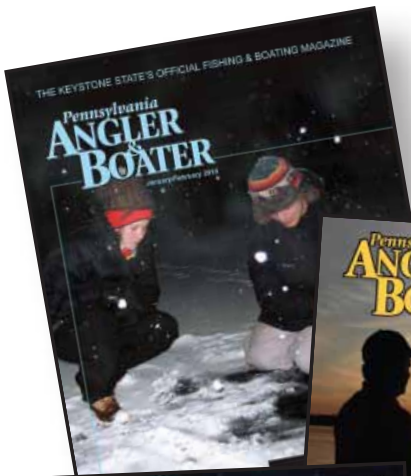
is the highest recognition the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission (PFBC) provides to persons in the cause of conservation.

The PFBC established the award to recognize citizens of Pennsylvania who have made outstanding contributions to the protection, conservation and enhancement of the aquatic resources of the Commonwealth. The award serves as a memorial to Ralph Abele for his steadfast and courageous work in protecting and conserving our natural resources.

Ralph W. Abele Conservation Heritage Award Winners

- 1991 Ken Sink
- 1992 Dr. Maurice Goddard
- 1993 Dr. William Kodrich
- 1994 Leonard A. Green
- 1996 Robert W. McCullough Jr.
- 1997 Peter S. Duncan
- 1998 James L. Myers
- 1999 Larry J. Schweiger
- 2000 Enoch S. (“Inky”) Moore
- 2001 Robert P. Ging Jr. and Raymond Savel
- 2002 Dr. Ed Bellis
- 2003 Dr. Edward Kissell
- 2004 Rozell A. Stidd
- 2005 Richard St. Pierre
- 2006 Dr. Ruth Patrick and Thomas J. Kerr
- 2007 Barbara Yeaman
- 2008 William E. Sharpe

Placard of award recipients, which hangs in the lobby of PFBC Harrisburg Headquarters.



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