

2016 Governor's Conservation Achievement Awards

Conservationist of the Year — Richard B. Hamilton (Raleigh) - A life-long wildlife and conservation giant with a huge impact on North Carolina's landscape for more than four decades, Hamilton served the state's wildlife agency as Statewide Wildlife Research Project Leader, Chief of the Division of Game, and Chief of the Division of Inland Fisheries before his promotion to Deputy Director in 1986 and subsequent role as Executive Director from 2004 until retirement in 2007. Hamilton has worked for all wildlife species, game and nongame alike, and now advocates for wildlife, and sporting and outdoor heritage issues.

Wildlife Conservationist of the Year — Jeff Hall (Greenville) - Hall is coordinator of the Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation program as a biologist with N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, and served as president of the N.C. Herpetological Society. Respected for his work on ephemeral pool creation for Carolina Gopher frogs and bog turtle swamps, and for his research on the last remaining populations of eastern Diamondback rattlers in the state, Hall also excels in leading citizen science research.

Sportsman of the Year — Allen E. Gant, Jr. (Burlington) - A lifelong hunter and angler, Gant spearheaded a new approach to marine resource conservation. Rather than fighting over how to re-allocate a shrinking resource, he supports reforms that would grow the number of fish for all by taking a conservation based approach to fisheries management focusing on economic benefits. His efforts have shifted the debate on fisheries management reform to conservation, providing pathways to resolve a decades-long dispute.

Land Conservationist of the Year — David K. Schnake (Durham) - As the Forest Research Operation Manager for the N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Schnake is responsible for more than 25 land projects spanning 17,000 diversely-forested acres. His work includes the development of comprehensive land conservation and restoration planning for shortleaf pine and oak savanna ecosystems, and his expertise has furthered the sustainable management and conservation of longleaf pine forests.

Water Conservationist of the Year — Lee Ann Smith (Arden) - As her Asheville community was plagued with health issues from cancer, tumors, and glaucoma, Smith became a fierce advocate upon learning her young son also had cancer. Neighbors had uncovered contamination and had been fighting with the EPA to hold CTS accountable for the toxic pollution for decades, and in 2009 Lee Ann joined the fight with fresh ideas and energy. In 2012, she co-founded the POWER Action Group NC to advocate for the cleanup of the contaminated site, finally prevailing when the EPA ordered to have the toxic Superfund site cleaned.

Environmental Educator of the Year — Kim J. Kelleher (Chapel Hill) — Children were floundering due to absences, lack of motivation and learning disabilities in her Title 1 school, leading this school counselor to spearhead an award-winning nature trail and bring environmental education to the forefront. The trail now has a guide with dozens of trail markers, an outdoor classroom and a butterfly garden. Kelleher integrated gardening, composting and recycling into classroom learning and made them a daily part of the school culture.

Conservation Communicator of the Year — Bonnie Monteleone (Wilmington) - As founder and executive director of the Plastic Ocean Project, Monteleone has studied and collected plastic marine samples globally. She developed an art initiative that has now traveled over 4,700 miles highlighting marine debris pollution. She shares her broad knowledge on pollution and prevention with tireless effort, teaching consumers about the impact of their purchasing decisions on fish and wildlife.

Youth Conservationist of the Year — Sean Thomas O'Donnell (Apex) - North Carolina lost a true conservation champion with the passing this year of Sean O'Donnell. O'Donnell was an avid sportsman whose enthusiasm for sharing, volunteering and practicing in all things outdoors was boundless. At an early age he began volunteering with groups like Quality Deer Management and NC Bowhunters Association. He led efforts to feed the needy with venison and participated in hunter education events, and youth hunting and fishing days.

Legislator of the Year — Rep. Larry Yarborough (Roxboro) - Rep. Yarborough is a champion for public trust resources, wildlife, and sporting issues. His staunch support for marine fisheries management and conservation leads the charge for reform and brings to bear the serious issue of fish stock decline in North Carolina coastal waters.

Forest Conservationist of the Year — Megan N. Sutton (Asheville) - Sutton is the Blue Ridge Program Director with The Nature Conservancy. Through her work, thousands of acres of forests have benefited from prescribed burning and restoration. Sutton leads TNC's collaborative efforts on forest management plans for 1.1 million acres of national forest in western NC. She was recently appointed to the National Advisory Committee for the Implementation of the National Forest System Land Management Planning Rule.

Municipal Conservationist of the Year — Maggie Valley Sanitary District - Protecting drinking water for the citizens of Maggie Valley in Haywood County, MVSD has a vision and a serious commitment to watershed conservation. It works with partners to conserve 2,000 acres that it owns and manages in the Campbell Creek watershed, and is spearheading the establishment of a nearly 3,000 acre gameland to protect elk and the Jonathan Creek watershed.

Wildlife Volunteer of the Year — Donald O. Funderud, Sr. (Asheville) - As a lifelong friend of fish and wildlife, and an avid fisherman and waterfowl hunter, Funderud has supported countless fishing events for youth, veterans, and the physically and mentally challenged. His many leadership roles with the Western North Carolina Muskie Club include president, treasurer and event coordinator, providing opportunities for many who would not otherwise have them.

Hunter Safety Educator of the Year — Joe Darden (Fayetteville) - A tireless instructor over the years, Darden has amassed over 2,500 volunteer hours teaching hunter education courses and related events. He is recognized as a pioneer and champion of hunter education, setting a remarkable example of dedicated volunteer service.

NCWF Chapter of the Year — Lake Norman Wildlife Conservationists (Mooresville) - Building community for conservation is the hallmark of this wildlife chapter. This group has built and deployed nesting boxes, heron rookeries, and osprey nesting platforms, while stabilizing shoreline habitat and creating fish habitat in and around the largest aquatic ecosystem in the state. The chapter coordinates an island habitat program and a robust community education effort that offers popular programs, wildlife boat tours and events.

NCWF Affiliate of the Year — Carolina Wetlands Association (Raleigh) - In the face of disappearing agency budgets for wetlands research, scientists and biologists formed CWA to increase the public's awareness and appreciation of the vital functions that wetland ecosystems provide including habitat, water quality and flood control. CWA quickly became a leader in policy and technical expertise across the Carolinas. Their 'Wetland Treasures' program highlights important wetlands with public field trips that draw conservation groups and community members alike.

Natural Resources Scientist of the Year — Fritz Rohde (Wilmington) - As a fish biologist for the National Marine Fisheries Service, Rohde is a staunch defender of freshwater, estuarine and marine resources. He is known for work on the Cape Fear River fish passage and the Roanoke River fish restoration plan, and discovered a new species of pygmy sunfish. He serves as president of the North American Native Fishes Association. Rohde's many publications and his volunteer work display an uncommon breadth of service in fish resources.

Conservation Organization of the Year — Resource Institute (Winston-Salem) - From restoring wetlands, streams and river systems to establishing greenways and removing dams, this non-profit fosters collaboration and innovation, working for functioning ecosystems and water quality. RI's Ararat River restoration effort near Mt. Airy turned a muddy river into a delayed harvest trout waterway with conservation easements and miles of greenway construction.

Business Conservationist of the Year — Garrett Wildflower Seed Farm (Smithfield) - Don Lee and his family turned their farm into a real-time laboratory and growing business, researching and cultivating native seeds. They are leaders in providing technical expertise and seed sources for native grasslands and Southern prairie plantings.

Wildlife Enforcement Officer of the Year — Branden D. Jones (Denton) - Master Officer Jones is the epitome of a wildlife officer. Hardworking and dedicated, he excels in investigative work, particularly in detecting egregious acts that jeopardize NC natural resources or threaten public safety. While investigating a poaching ring, he uncovered a massive drug lab and worked with other agencies to detain suspects who were later indicted on numerous felony charges.

Marine Fisheries Enforcement Officer of the Year — William Register (Wilmington) - From patrolling heavily-fished coastal waters to monitoring pollution levels, nursery areas and endangered species, Officer Register has made a huge impact on southeastern North Carolina's sounds and rivers. A former Navy Seal, Register helped develop and implement a Water Survival course for Marine Patrol and Division of Marine Fisheries employees, ensuring safety for countless officers and staff in the future.