



Harold Jefferson Coolidge, Jr. (1904-1985)

Introduction

Hal was one of the founders of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), a former president of the Union, and its principal fundraiser from 1948 into the 1980s, assuring that the IUCN survived during its early decades. He designed and established the commission structure of the Union to provide access to the world's expertise in the various aspects of conservation. He was founder and first chairman of two commissions that became the core of the Union's early activities, the Survival Service (now Species Survival Commission) and National Parks (now World Commission on Protected Areas), and he also was responsible for establishing what became the Law, Education and Ecology Commissions. He was the first to bring women scientists into international conservation research, and he influenced the lives of many students and professionals throughout the world who wished to achieve the goals of conservation and environment protection.

Hal Coolidge's Life and Accomplishments:

Hal was born in Boston, Massachusetts, USA, in 1904 and died in Beverly, Massachusetts, in 1985. Initially intending to be a diplomat, he studied at the Milton Academy, the University of Arizona and Harvard. However, he early became interested in natural history and developed associations with the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology which led to participation in the Harvard Medical Expedition across Africa in 1926-27. This experience initiated a lifelong interest in Africa and in primates. He subsequently studied zoology at Cambridge University in England, and published an important monograph revising the taxonomy of gorillas.

Shortly thereafter he was asked by Theodore and Kermit Roosevelt, sons of the American President Theodore Roosevelt, to organize and lead the Indo-China Division of the Kelley-Roosevelt Asian Expedition for the Field Museum in Chicago. This he did in 1928-29, travelling over a thousand miles on the Mekong River and its tributaries by canoe and raft. The published results included scientific papers, films and a popular book, "Three Kingdoms of Indo-China" authored with Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. Again, this introduction to Asia led to a lifelong involvement with that part of the world including other expeditions, scientific and conservation work throughout Asia and the Pacific.

From 1929 through 1942, with leave during World War II, he was Assistant Curator of Mammals and Associate in Mammalogy of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard. His duties were wide ranging but his principal interests were in primates and conservation. In 1942 he joined the war effort in the office of Special Services (OSS) serving in Washington, D.C., England, France and Italy. At the request of the Joint Chiefs of Staff he organized and headed the Emergency Rescue Equipment Section of the OSS. His accomplishments included a chemical shark repellent, preparation of survival manuals and other rescue equipment, and a signaling mirror credited with saving the lives of thousands of downed pilots. In 1945 he received the U.S. Legion of Merit award for his achievements.

At the conclusion of the war Hal helped the U.S. National Academy of Sciences to organize the Pacific Science Conference which developed a future program for U.S. scientists in the Pacific area. Implementation of the plan was given to the Academy's newly established Pacific Science Board and Hal was appointed as its full time Executive Director, a post he held from 1946 until his retirement in 1970. He travelled several months a year, organized international exchange programs and scientific research activities, and assisted thousands of scientists from the US, Pacific and Asian countries.

Hal's initial exposure to natural history and concomitantly to conservation probably came in his early teens through hunting trips in New England, along with his subsequent summer with the Bureau of



Biological Survey in Alaska. His first African and Asian experiences cemented both the international scope of his interests and his concern with conservation -- which became a lifelong driving force.

In 1930, inspired by his friend, sportsman and conservationist Dr. John C. Phillips, Hal established the American Committee for International Wildlife Protection. This was the earliest organization for international conservation in the U.S. Largely due to Hal, the Committee published a number of books and pamphlets, established a worldwide network of conservation contacts, and played a role in the development of several international environmental conventions, notably the 1933 London Convention Relative to the Preservation of Fauna and Flora in their Natural State, and the 1940 Convention on Nature Protection and Wildlife Preservation in the Western Hemisphere.

Hal recognized early that the key to achieving conservation in other countries was to identify potential conservation leaders and to stimulate, encourage and support them. This process became the hallmark of his modus operandi, and the lives of legions of conservation professionals in many countries throughout the world were profoundly marked by Hal's encouragement, his support, and his friendly but persistent prodding. The result in countries literally throughout the world was the creation of a core of dedicated local conservationists. He would not take "no" for an answer and he sought to imbue others with that ethic. At the same time, his approach was low key, supporting and emphasizing the local individuals to such a degree that his own role was often virtually invisible to outsiders. A common comment made by subsequent conservationists was "I never knew Hal had played a key role in that country until I visited and heard it from the people involved."

One of his principal goals was to create a truly international conservation organization. He wrote "I had become increasingly aware of the need to identify leaders in conservation in various countries to safeguard their natural environment, and to enlist their efforts in forming an international action organization to help preserve increasingly endangered species of wildlife." While he assisted efforts to establish such an organization in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, it was not until 1948 that his efforts, with others, came to fruition in the establishment of the IUCN.

The above quote also is significant because in it, Hal combined safeguarding natural environment and preserving endangered species. Much early conservation concern focused on endangered species per se. However, Hal's approach was more holistic. He emphasized what we now call an ecosystem approach, focusing on the natural habitat itself, or the ecosystem in which endangered species were found. He also recognized and emphasized that people had to be considered along with species and habitats. It is interesting that at the time when Dr. Aldo Leopold was developing habitat-based wildlife management in the United States, Hal was developing ecosystem-based approaches to conservation internationally.

In 1948 the IUCN was born at the Fontainebleau conference convened by UNESCO, thanks to its Director General, Sir Julian Huxley, and hosted by the Government of France. The participants included representatives of 23 governments, 126 national institutions and 8 international organizations. The purpose was to create the Union, and in due time the conference agreed upon and established it, much in its present form, although the initial name was International Union for Protection of Nature (IUPN). The name IUCN replaced IUPN at the 1956 Edinburgh General Assembly. Hal had enthusiastically supported the European-based efforts leading up to this event, which he attended as a member of the U.S. Delegation. That delegation drafted the Preamble to the IUPN Constitution, which spoke of "the preservation of the entire world biotic community, or Man's natural environment, which includes the Earth's renewable natural resources of which it is composed and on which rests the foundations of human civilization", and of the need to protect, restore and administer these resources wisely. Hal played a major role in drafting that preamble and it clearly reflected his holistic approach to conservation. He also was co-sponsor of a resolution emphasizing the critical importance of education, which might be considered the foundation for the later creation of the Commission on Education. Hal was also elected Vice President of the new IUPN.



Hal recognized that as negotiated at Fontainebleau, the financial base for the IUPN was grossly inadequate. In order to obtain worldwide conservation expertise for the Union, at little or no cost, as well as to expand its recognition and credibility, he designed what became its commission structure. He based it on the highly successful structure of panels and committees of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, where he remained Executive Director of the Pacific Science Board, and in the IUPN the commission structure became known as the “Coolidge Model.” He started the process with a series of IUPN committees for education, endangered species, law, national parks and ecology. These then were transformed into full commissions, with Hal as founding chair of both what became the Species Survival Commission and the World Commission on National Parks and Protected Areas. Part of the beauty of the commission structure is its flexibility which has allowed it to adapt to changing needs during the Union’s lifetime, but the basic structure has been outstandingly successful and continues to make an essential contribution to the IUCN’s identity and success.

In 1958 Hal convinced the IUCN Board to establish a Provisional Commission on National Parks which became a full commission in 1960. Both were under his chairmanship. One of his goals was to bring national parks and the IUCN to the attention of governments worldwide and to create prestige and incentive for the creation and maintenance of parks. He did this by convincing the United Nations Economic and Social Council to adopt a resolution calling for the establishment of a UN World List of National Parks and Protected Areas, to be developed by the IUCN Commission on National Parks, and then organizing the First World Congress of National Parks that was held in Seattle, USA, in 1962. The IUCN Commission handled preparation for the World List and much of the Congress. The Congress provided the springboard to launch the World List, and IUCN has continued organizing the Congresses each decade since.

With such an inadequate funding base, during its first decades the Union frequently seemed on the verge of collapse, and such fears resurfaced periodically at least into the 1980s. Each time there was a looming financial disaster or critical need for expansion of operations, Hal stepped up and provided the needed assistance. Over the years he provided a whole series of relatively short term staff members to the IUPN/IUCN at no cost to the Union, and he became the Union’s principal fund raiser from 1948 into the 1980s. From the Union’s founding to the late 1960s his efforts were focused on putting out financial fires on an ad hoc basis, largely through contributions from individuals and small grants from institutions. But after he became president in 1966 he sought to put the Union on a much sounder and more ambitious basis. He spent several months a year at IUCN’s headquarters in Morges, Switzerland where he worked to raise the visibility of the Union, and negotiated major grants that allowed the Union to move to a higher plane of activity. Thanks to Hal’s initiatives and dogged drive, the tenth General Assembly in New Delhi in 1969 was a turning point for IUCN in terms of a much broader strategic approach and very substantially increased staff and capabilities.

Hal’s retirement from the National Academy of Sciences gave him more time to devote to the Union. At the 1972 General Assembly in Banff, Canada, Hal’s terms as president were up but because of his extraordinary contributions to the IUCN he was made Honorary President. As such he continued to provide advice, guidance and, as necessary, fund raising as long as his health allowed. Perhaps his final input into IUCN was a 1983 letter to then president Mohammed Kassas pointing out that IUCN had so far failed to have a significant impact on religious groups and religious thought, and urging that the Union address that issue effectively. He also urged the IUCN to do more to unite biological issues, including conservation, with the arts and humanities.

In his long career Hal received many forms of recognition for his conservation, scientific and diplomatic achievements. These included honorary degrees, decorations from Governments in North and South America, Europe, Africa and Asia, and numerous Awards from scientific and environmental organizations. He was active in the direction of many national and international, governmental and non-governmental environmental organizations worldwide. He inspired, assisted, and perhaps even created truly remarkable numbers of conservation professionals throughout the world, and through his support



and encouragement of local conservationists he played a major role in developing the conservation organizations and activities in countries worldwide. Yet the IUCN was his primary focus. He played a major role in developing and promoting the original concepts for such an organization; was a central player in IUCN's creation; a designer of absolutely key parts of the Union's structure; the fund raiser who repeatedly rescued the organization; and leader who provided guidance to the organization for 35 years.

It can truly be said that the IUCN and the development of international conservation represent legacies from Hal Coolidge's 60 year career.

Biography by Lee M. Talbot and Martha Hayne Talbot.