



NATURE'S CHAMPION

Celebrating Bob Bendick's
remarkable career

A full-page photograph with a warm, golden-orange color palette. In the foreground, a person stands with their back to the camera, looking out over a field of tall, dry grass. In the middle ground, a large, mature tree stands prominently. The background is a misty, hazy landscape with more trees and a soft, glowing light from the sun, which is low on the horizon. The sky is a pale, hazy blue.

A lasting impact
on conservation
— for nature and
people

After 29 years with TNC, Robert Bendick leaves a remarkable conservation legacy.

HIS WORK CAN BE SEEN ACROSS THE UNITED STATES.

On April 20, 2010, the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded in the Gulf. For 87 excruciating days, the nation watched the largest marine oil spill in history unfold, wreaking previously unimaginable damage to the ecosystem and to people's livelihoods across the region.

For The Nature Conservancy's Gulf Program Director Robert "Bob" Bendick, the spill would become a pivotal moment in his long, distinguished career in conservation. In typical Bendick fashion, his focus throughout the spill's aftermath would be trained both on the ecological damage and the human impact.

"I was down in New Orleans when the Deepwater Horizon blew up in the Gulf, and the first person who called me was Bob," recalls Keith Ouchley, former TNC Louisiana state director (now retired). With his trademark calm, thoughtful demeanor, Bendick asked how everyone was doing and then how he could help.

"Bob was right there with us the whole time," Ouchley says. Bendick used his extensive network of government contacts to support the response process, from damage assessment to eventually helping push through the RESTORE Act, which President Obama signed into law in 2012.

Bendick is described by his colleagues — those both inside and out of TNC — as a visionary thinker and hard-working conservationist. But as he approached his retirement this summer after a now-legendary 29-year career at TNC, many staff members used more heartfelt titles to describe his work: mentor, advocate and beloved colleague who helped shape and support the next generation of TNC's leaders.

Bendick's career in conservation spanned more than half a century, beginning as an urban planner who went on to help revitalize and restore a polluted town in Rhode Island. From there, he had a string of successively more strategic and impactful positions, including deputy commissioner for natural resources with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and director of the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management. Both roles entailed guiding conservation and environmental agencies and activities statewide.

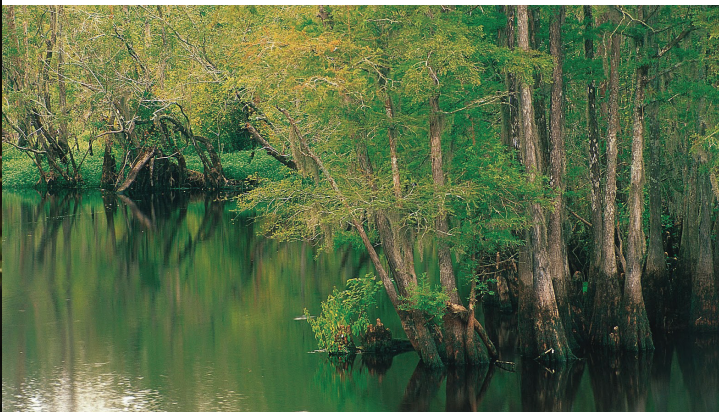
His enduring conservation legacy can be seen all over the map of the United States

Prior to taking the helm of TNC's Gulf program in 2013, Bendick served as TNC director of U.S. government relations. In that role, he supervised TNC's engagement with Congress and the Obama Administration to influence or enact a wide range of policy initiatives. Before that, he was vice president and managing director of TNC's 10-state Southern U.S. region. He first joined the organization in 1995 as Florida state director.

DISASTER AND HEALING IN THE GULF

In the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, Bendick was instrumental in seeing the passage of the RESTORE Act, which created a trust fund from the billions of dollars in fines paid by the companies deemed responsible for mitigating the disaster. Who better to provide guidance on the best ways to deploy those funds than the man who helped secure them?

So, in 2013, Bendick transitioned from government relations to take the helm of TNC's Gulf Program — meaning he would also be taking on the responsibility of earning grants for TNC and executing and coordinating restoration efforts across the five Gulf Coast states.





"It probably was hard for him to decide whether he was going to do that or not, because he was doing such important things in the government relations program, and so many people relied on him for that," says Ingrid Nyborg, who provided operational support for Bendick's Government Relations and Gulf teams. "But I think he saw an opportunity to actually do something that had enormous benefit for an enormous number of people — people who really needed help."

An avid and gifted writer, Bendick himself described progress toward healing the Gulf in a piece he penned earlier this year to mark the 15th anniversary of the spill. Noting the hundreds of public-private projects undertaken to repair natural and cultural resources, he sums up the collective impact:

"While the spill was a human and environmental tragedy, its aftermath has demonstrated that remarkable conservation progress is possible when people and their governments work together for a common goal — in this case saving their cherished Gulf and its benefits to people and nature in this time of more intense storms, rising seas and heavier rainfall."

Among the many accomplishments that Gulf team members cite, they are particularly proud of two projects.

Starting with \$50,000 in seed money for a six-month pilot, Bendick and Jeff DeQuattro, the Gulf Program's Director of Restoration, have generated millions to grow and sustain GulfCorps. The program originated with the duo's shared idea that the people of the Gulf, especially young people, should be active participants in its recovery.

"GulfCorps has accomplished over 30,000 acres' worth of work ... and employed over 600 young adults and about 450 of those have gone on to get jobs in environmental fields," says DeQuattro. "We help them land those jobs and prepare them for those jobs."

A deep concern for the people of the Gulf region permeates Bendick's work. According to Gulf Program Director of Science Dr. Christine Shepard, Bendick worried that small communities might be missing out on funding and opportunities to use nature-based approaches to reduce coastal risks like flooding, so he took it upon himself to visit those communities and find out firsthand how they were faring.

The result, she says, is the thriving and growing SUNS (Scaling Up Nature-based Solutions) program. After an initial study confirmed that communities would welcome efforts that both restore nature and strengthen their towns, "it's evolved exponentially," Shepard says.

A REMARKABLE RECORD OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS

As Chief Conservation Officer David Banks notes, one of Bendick's most indelible marks on The Nature Conservancy started — in typical Bendick fashion — with an influential piece of writing. Namely, a sort of white paper on "whole systems" — those boundary-spanning natural phenomena like the Gulf, the Mississippi River Basin, the Chesapeake Bay, the Rockies and the Appalachians.

"His lasting impact is probably his ability to take the theoretical concept of this whole system idea and then demonstrate how you apply that in a place as big as the Gulf," Banks says. "He also demonstrated how someone working at a whole system can break down state barriers or boundaries and get people to collaborate."



*Jill Bendick, Rebecca "Bex" Kier, Robin Plaziak, Bob Bendick and Eric Bendick at Bex's 50th birthday celebration.
Photo provided by Robin Plaziak.*

"Bob embodied that 'One Conservancy' spirit for me in a way that made a lasting impact," agrees Jan Glendening. Glendening, who now oversees conservation for North America, the Caribbean and Micronesia, met Bendick when she served as state director in Iowa.

As Glendening was gearing up for her first lobbying day with Iowa trustees in Washington, D.C., Bendick reached out by phone to offer his assistance. Not only did he end up helping navigate meetings with representatives, but conversations over lunch and cab rides led to ongoing collaboration.

"I was talking with him about some state policy opportunities we had that could really improve water quality efforts downstream in the Gulf," she recalls. Without being asked, a short time later Bendick quietly provided funding to support Iowa's lobbying efforts to benefit the Mississippi River.

Michael Lipford, former Southern Division director and Virginia state director, shares a similar memory of riding in a van with Bendick and "other visionaries" on the Route 61 Blues Trail (stretching from New Orleans to Memphis).

The conversation turned to how the rivers and delta could be reconnected. "All of a sudden, we were talking about a vision of what the Southern Division could do working together and that became the Southern Deltas program," Lipford recalls.

The stories go on and on, as current and former colleagues remember how Bendick quietly but persistently not only helped conceptualize big, ambitious ideas, but also tirelessly worked to support their implementation on the ground — even before coming to TNC.

"Bob has had an incredible impact on conservation in the East," says Terry Sullivan, former Rhode Island state director (now executive director of Aquidneck Island Land Trust in that state). Those results, Sullivan adds, stretch from Adirondack Park in New York to the Everglades and Florida Forever.

A LASTING MARK ON PEOPLE

For all his storied conservation accomplishments, Bendick will likely be remembered most for the mark he's made on people, both staff and stakeholders. To a person, everyone who has worked with Bendick cites his thoughtfulness and compassion, his sage but never overbearing advice, his calm demeanor.

"He comes home and vents," laughs his wife Jill Bendick, acknowledging that he's human after all. Jill and Bob met in high school, sharing first a mutual dislike of Latin class.

They talk about everything at the end of the day, she says, so she knows more than anyone how driven he has been for his entire career. With everything that Bob has achieved, though, she suggests that he might be most proud of being a mentor — of "the people he brought along."

What's next for the Bendicks? "We don't hang around much; we don't swing in the hammock and read," Jill says. Instead, look for Bob to be enjoying the Gulf he's worked so hard to protect — most likely in a kayak, paddling alongside Jill, their grown children and the grandkids.

But don't expect Bob to stop working. As DeQuattro notes, "He's already saying, 'I'm going to come back and volunteer!'"

A BRIGHT FUTURE FOR THE GULF

By Bob Bendick

On a hot Saturday this May, we launched our kayak from the beach in “downtown” Cedar Key on Florida’s Gulf Coast. Some buildings along the shore were still broken and shuttered from last year’s hurricanes. We stopped to watch young dolphins feeding on mullet and then paddled on toward Atsena Otie Key, the closest of the offshore islands. Graceful V-shaped flights of white ibis passed just overhead.

Atsena Otie has changed in the years since the last time we paddled there. Mangroves had almost completely displaced the salt marshes. Oaks and pines were dying from saltwater intrusion and from the storms’ salt-laden winds. Two cabbage palms stood at the edge of an eroding beach.



Anyone who doubts that the Gulf region’s climate is changing should come to this place. Despite these changes, nature has adapted and survived, revealing hope for the future.

I have dedicated the last 12 years of my long conservation career to working on the Gulf’s restoration with TNC colleagues and many partners. While we cannot put the Gulf back to the way it was 100 or even 50 years ago, we are still making remarkable progress toward a healthier Gulf since the Deepwater Horizon oil spill threatened the region’s future 15 years ago. I have learned from dozens of meetings, field trips, science papers, colleagues and partners that several conservation strategies are particularly important to continued restoration success.

WE CAN AND SHOULD:

- Bring together practical science and inclusive citizen engagement to find the common ground needed to produce effective long-term restoration plans.
- Use work in individual bays and estuaries as the building blocks for overall Gulf restoration.
- Recognize and coordinate the important federal, state, local and nonprofit roles in the restoration process.
- Create and allocate reliable sources of funding to adapt the Gulf to changing conditions over the long term.
- Use natural features and processes as tools for shaping the future Gulf: nature-based solutions.
- Understand the importance of communication in inspiring conservation of the Gulf’s resources.

From a beach on Atsena Otie, we could see Sea Horse Key much further offshore. My wife and I used to paddle there and make side trips to other islands, but now in our late 70s, the distance and exposure to open water look daunting. We must be content with shorter trips, leaving the epic journeys to the next generations just as creating a healthy future Gulf now falls to the younger people to strengthen and sustain the effective community of public and private organizations shaping the region. I have every confidence they will succeed.

Profound thanks to my colleagues at TNC and to the talented and motivated partners in and out of government who are achieving such great success in saving the Gulf’s future. Onward!

Robert Bendick

REFLECTIONS AND APPRECIATION



I don't have a particular story that leaps out as much as how much Bob's quiet tenacity and unwavering faith in all of us was a combination that allowed for success all around the Gulf and a telltale sign of his wisdom. One of the goofier things he and I (and Andrew Blejwas and Chris Shepard) did together was to get in the dolphin tank at the Indianapolis Zoo. Long story, but we were there helping them create a new dolphin exhibit that showcased natural behaviors and highlighted the connection between the Wabash River and the Gulf. Bob is a rock and a light. We've benefited greatly from his presence and leadership and will be diminished without him.

— Seth Blitch, Louisiana

What an amazing career Bob has had, enriching the lives of all who have known and worked with him, while giving so much and doing so much for TNC and conservation. Florida state director; regional manager; director of government relations; leader of our Gulf of Mexico program since the Deepwater Horizon; mentor; friend; star Williams alum — he has been an inspiration to me and so many others throughout TNC. Bob, you are also a great writer and communicator. Time and again in your various positions, you have helped all of us appreciate the depth and importance of what TNC is all about. As I write this, I recall a senior leaders' meeting in Denver. The organization seemed a bit lost. You rose, and with your prepared remarks, so beautifully written and eloquently expressed, you had us spellbound. No need for Power Point. Your words said it all. We all went to a lot of TNC meetings. One of the things I enjoyed the most about those gatherings was visiting with you and seeing you in action. In your role as government relations director especially, you had a huge impact — and worked harder than anyone I know. Many times, I thought I was working late on a GR issue, when your email in response — two hours ahead — was later still. Your deep commitment to the cause was infectious and made all of us want to give even more. I hope you are as proud of all that you have accomplished as TNC is as proud of you. Your legacy — spanning so many years wearing so many hats — is huge. Best of luck as the next chapter of your life unfolds, and congratulations on your retirement. I hope this means we will see more of you out west. Happy Trails and don't be a stranger.

— Your admirer, fellow Billsville alum and honored friend,
Dave Livermore, Utah

Bob is a big picture thinker who works tirelessly toward the end goal. When opportunity is ripe, he invites the right people to sit around the table and listens with interest and an open mind. It has been a pleasure working with him in my tenure at TNC over the past six years. I still remember him taking the time to eat a meal with me at the GOMA All Hands meeting soon after I started working at TNC. I was honored he would make the time in his schedule to get to know me and my work — a testament to his character. His efforts to connect thoughtfully and personally are very much appreciated. He always sends an end-of-year email wishing staff a happy holiday season. And he never misses an opportunity to celebrate the accomplishments of his colleagues. He will be missed, but I am sure he will continue to do great things to inspire the protection of the environment and the beautiful Gulf we call home.

— Lauren Hutch Williams, Texas

Bob has always been such a bright, kind, welcoming presence at TNC, and I truly value his friendship. He helped guide me as I grounded myself in my new role at TNC nearly three years ago, and I always felt comfortable coming to Bob to ask any silly questions or to bounce off my crazy ideas. He so clearly cares deeply about his Gulf team, and similar to many of us working on the coast, he has the biggest heart for conservation — something that I know will continue even through his retirement. Similarly, we will continue to move forward the great work that Bob has spearheaded on the Gulf Coast, and his legacy at TNC will live on for many, many years!

— Kathy Sweezy, Texas

Bob has always been one of our biggest cheerleaders for our Lightning Point Restoration Project, as he made sure everyone knew about our complex project but also cheered on our smaller projects since each one contributed to the conservation of the Gulf in their own way. I am thankful and honored to have worked with Bob over the last 13 years and wish him all the best in his retirement.

— Mary Kate Brown, Alabama

I so wish I could be with all of you celebrating Bob and his amazing career. It was a privilege to serve with him as his integrity, commitment, work ethic, wisdom and kindness exemplify all that is best, not only in the Conservancy but in humanity. Thank you again.

— Jora Young, Florida

Bob was the very best, an incredible leader. Belize, Bahamas, Peru, Amazon, Colombia. We all had a ball!

— Joe and Renate Hixon, Florida

Thank you.