



Bill Bakke
2005 Wild Steelhead Coalition Conservation Award

The following is Bill McMillian's reading on accepting the WSC Conservation Award on Bill Bakke's behalf.

Not since the writings of Roderick Haig-Brown had a Northwest writer emerged with such in-depth, intelligent, and readable writings on fishing and fish conservation issues as those by a 24 year old Bill Bakke with his first magazine articles in the late 1960s. Moreover, the volume of his conservation writings quickly surpassed those of Haig-Brown's and set the bar that much higher for those of us who tried to follow as best we could. By the mid 1980s his influence was so pervasively recognized that the Portland Oregonian featured him as "Savior of the Salmon."

But most are not aware of the sacrifices that advocacy required from the 1960s through the early 1980s when funding for real fish conservation work simply did not exist. Bill lived in a tiny 2-room house of late 19th century construction near Reed College. Few knew the house was even there. Hidden by a laurel hedge gone wild and a tiny yard of shoulder high weeds, its nickname was Bleak House. It had no heat, and those of us who visited held our hands at the burners of the old range as the winter winds blew through the cracks in the walls. Bill lived there for nearly ten years, annual income \$3,000, mooching meals, drinks, fishing trips, and pipe tobacco from a growing list of believers in his conservation vision. His meager \$35-\$100 checks for magazine articles paid his way to perpetual fishery meetings from California to British Columbia, and inland to Idaho.

Bakke became the Northwest's Pied Piper of fish conservation. He taught fish interest groups the complexities of genetics and biology from which to argue the lack of science being applied to fishery management. No one has ever led his followers so nobly or so well, patiently teaching fishermen to argue the issues rather than curse and point fingers at each other.

The Wild Steelhead Coalition exemplifies the teachings of Bill Bakke, and at no time have wild steelhead been more threatened, or more in need of your dedication, self-sacrifice, and activism. It is no longer just the usual 4 "H"s, habitat, hydro, harvest, and hatcheries. There is now a fifth "H" – heat – in the form of global warming which may ultimately reduce the range of coldwater fishes to latitudes closest to the poles, and elsewhere to the high elevations of mountains. Just as the retreat of the last Ice Age disconnected southern steelhead populations from the sea, leaving behind Mexico's isolated mountain trout, steelhead range is again retreating northward. Mexico exemplifies our steelhead future if we do not act with the necessary sacrifices of dramatically reducing America's consumptive life styles with global leadership rather than being dragged kicking and screaming by the rest of the world. Global warming pales anything Northwest steelhead have yet faced since the last Ice Age pushed anadromous fish populations south.

The example of Bill Bakke's life is one whose emulation provides a last hope for slowing the climatic change modern human numbers and life styles have sped into fast forward. What he has taught us through lessons in biology, he has similarly taught with the example of his life lived as a material minimalist: his ancient pipe perpetually repaired with a band of white adhesive tape; his homes small and cold; his fishing rods few and inexpensive; his dress, thrift store tweeds; his spirit that of Sparta's ancient Greeks in the disdain for mere comfort; a life in no fear of living at poverty's edge to accommodate his love of wild rivers and steelhead.

This is the man who has been my mentor for 35 years, and the man whose award I am honored to accept in his absence this evening with his apologies and gratitude for your recognition.



*Bill McMillian, left Accept Bill Bakke's award from
WSC President Rich Simms*