

EDITORIAL & COMMENTARY



Marlu Lake, Lincroft, July 10

SCOTT LONGFIELD

IT'S YOUR TURN

Commentary

Len Soucy: Conservation Trailblazer

By Michele S. Byers

Emile DeVito will never forget an unusual encounter on a winter day in 1977.

When he was a college freshman, he, his father and brothers were looking for hawks in the Great Swamp when a man ambled down the road holding two metal coffee cans fastened together to form a hollow cylinder.

"He told us he had a red-shouldered hawk right there in the can," Emile recalled. "He had just found it injured, and he put it in the can for protection."

The man was Leonard J. Soucy Jr., and he was taking the hawk back to the Raptor Trust, the avian rehabilitation center in Millington that he had founded.

Over the years, the chance encounter grew into a solid friendship. Emile, staff biologist at New Jersey Conservation Foundation, brought in dozens of injured raptors he found during his travels around the state. And Len sometimes asked Emile to help release birds back into the wild.

Len, who passed away on June 11 at the age of 82, never set out to become a rescuer of injured and orphaned birds. He wasn't a trained veterinarian or ornithologist, just an ordinary guy – an engraver by trade – who fell in love with birds of prey on a 1964 trip to Hawk Mountain Sanctuary in Pennsylvania.

"Len Soucy was the most gentle and caring person you could ever meet," said Tom Gilmore, the former president of New Jersey

Audubon. "No personal sacrifice was too great for Len when it came to caring for orphaned and injured wildlife. He was there for them 24/7."

And because of Len, thousands of New Jerseyans got their start in bird-watching and nature appreciation.

Chris Soucy, Len's son who has taken over leadership of the Raptor Trust, believes his father's most important legacy is the people in whom he instilled a reverence for nature: The kids who showed up with baby birds in a shoebox, the people who carried in injured hawks and owls wrapped in blankets.

"He touched those people, one at a time," Chris said. Most people who brought in birds called back later to see how "their" bird was doing.

Len's interest in the natural world was vast, spanning from woolly mammoths to wood turtles. His enthusiasm opened the door for people and families to get interested and involved in wildlife conservation. "He would talk to anyone who listened," Chris said. "His vehicle just happened to be birds because that's what he knew best."

In 1968, Len and his wife Diane bought a home on 14 acres in Millington, Morris County, on the border of the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge. That gave the Soucys the needed space for bird facilities. Their first "resident" was an injured barn owl that had been living in their bathroom.

In 1970, Len received a state license to capture, band and release raptors. As his reputation spread, more and more birds were brought to him – and not just raptors. Additional aviaries and cages were built and volunteers were recruited to care for the birds.

By the early 1980s, the Soucys' operation had grown so big and expensive that Len and Diane couldn't finance it by themselves. The Raptor Trust was formally incorporated as a nonprofit. Over the years it continued to grow.

Today, the Raptor Trust includes a medical infirmary, an education building, and some 70 outdoor cages and aviaries. In an average year, it cares for 3,000 to 4,000 birds in distress. "Tens of thousands of birds have been treated here and released back into the wild," Chris Soucy said.

To learn more about the Raptor Trust, and the Leonard J. Soucy Jr. Memorial Fund that has been established to carry on his work, go to www.theraptortrust.org.

And for more information about preserving New Jersey's land and natural resources, visit the New Jersey Conservation Foundation website at www.njconservation.org or contact me at info@njconservation.org.

Michele S. Byers is the executive director of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation.

Are We Doomed to Polarization?

By Lee H. Hamilton

We Americans are trapped in a political dilemma. We all like representative democracy, but we don't much like the way it's performing.

The reason for this dissatisfaction is clear. Polls in recent years detail a polarized nation, divided both ideologically and politically. This is, as the Pew Research Center put it recently, "a defining feature of politics today." In the public's eye, Washington gets most of the blame for this.

Yet Congress and the political world around it reflect the rest of the country more than we'd like to believe. Our nation is divided ideologically. It's also segregated politically, with many Americans preferring to associate with and live near people who share their views; gerrymandered districts and closed primaries intensify the effect. Our media is more partisan than it used to be. Interest groups – many of them funded by ordinary Americans who want their voices magnified – are more engaged than they were a generation ago.

And though we deplore negative politics, we respond to it and even encourage our favorite partisans to engage in it.

Anyone who becomes president today does so with nearly half the country opposed to him the day he takes office. Moreover, we face a long list of issues where decisive action may be impossible: abortion, gun control, climate change, a host of budgetary and economic problems, the death penalty, tax reform, immigration, drug laws. These issues don't just divide Congress; they divide the nation, with no clear path forward.

Our admired political system, in other words, is not working well. In Pew's survey, the extremes make up just over a third of the

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American public, but because they're disproportionately active, they drive our politics. The larger, more diverse center can't agree on a direction for the country, but its members are united by their distaste for the tone of politics and the unwillingness of politicians to compromise and break the stalemate. We are not getting the politics we want.

So how do we resolve our dilemma?

There are many procedural steps that can ease the gridlock on Capitol Hill. Among them, the House and Senate could schedule themselves so that they're in session at the same time. Congressional leaders and the president ought to meet at least once a month. Congress needs to work the same five-day week that the rest of us do, and reduce its centralized leadership by empowering committees. Open primaries would help moderate the nation's politics, as would bipartisan redistricting commissions capable of doing away with gerrymandered districts. Increasing voter participation and improving the integrity of our elections would also help. Limiting the Senate filibuster and allowing minority parties in both chambers more of an opportunity to offer amendments, would open up debate and forestall endless stalemates.

But resolving our dilemma is unlikely to happen quickly. It's hard to see either side in this partisan divide winning or losing decisively in the elections immediately ahead. Even if one party wins both houses in Congress, it's not easy to move when the White House is in the control of another party. With the need for 60 votes in the Senate, the minority party can always find ways to slow things down.

Still, it's worth remembering that American politics is dynamic, not static. Change occurs, sometimes quickly, but more often slowly. We won't forever be this evenly divided, because public opinion will eventually evolve and the system will respond.

Which raises my final point. Even when our frustration with division and discord spills over into impatience with the system itself, our obligations as American citizens remain the same. We face complex problems that don't have simple solutions. They demand a willingness to exercise the values of representative democracy: tolerance, mutual respect, accepting ideological differences, working to build consensus.

Our core values accept that the differences in opinions among us will continue, but also compel us to find a way through them so the country can move forward. By accepting the challenges that come with living in a representative democracy and renewing our confidence in it, we can lay the groundwork for change. In the end, we created our political dilemma and are responsible for working our way through it.

Lee Hamilton is director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University. He was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for 34 years.



COURTESY DORN'S CLASSIC IMAGES

Two River Moment

West Front Street and the Hubbard Bridge, which spans the Swimming River from Red Bank to Middletown, were dirt covered in 1919 when this photo was taken. A new bridge, begun in September, is now under construction and should be completed in May 2015.