

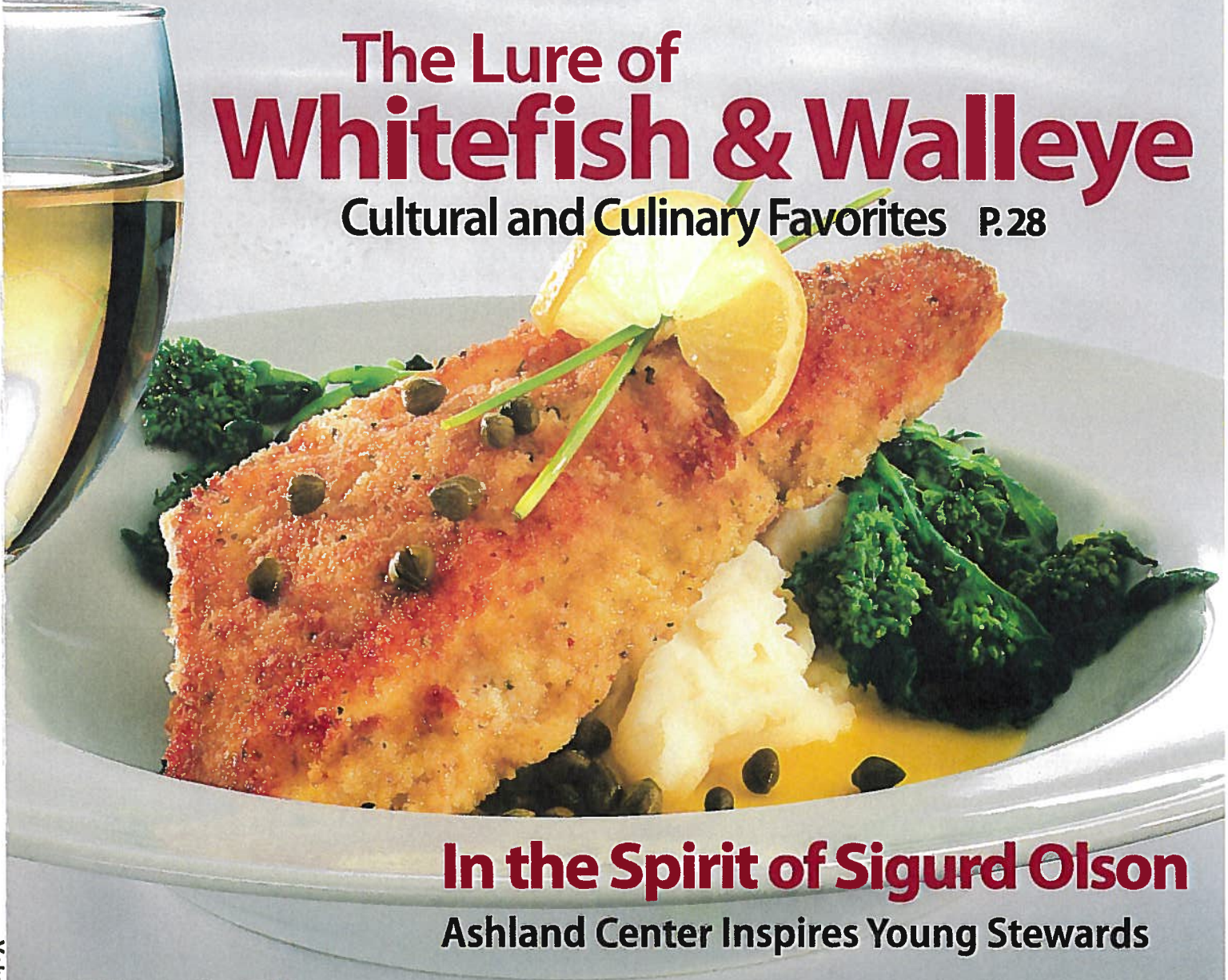
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Lake Superior Magazine April/May 2013

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In the Spirit of Sigurd Olson Ashland Center Inspires Young Stewards

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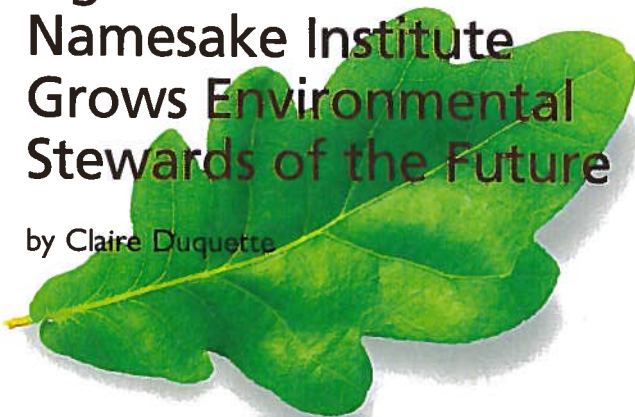
Volume 35 Issue 2



A Passion for Preservation

**Sigurd Olson's
Namesake Institute
Grows Environmental
Stewards of the Future**

by Claire Duquette



Anna Hipke-Krueger has the best work-study job on the entire campus of Northland College in Ashland, Wisconsin – just ask her. As an intern at the Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute in its LoonWatch program, the vivacious freshman knows one thing for certain about this work.

“I think we’re doing something that really makes a difference,” Anna says.

Admittedly, tasks like printing hundreds of maps and assembling information packets for program volunteers aren’t the most glamorous, but Anna and fellow intern Jordan Wellnitz feel even this work promotes cleaner lakes and a healthier environment. They are happy to do it.

Sigurd Olson would be proud.

Some 40 years after it opened its doors, the institute named for the revered conservationist and author continues to serve a mission that reverberates with the

work of the man himself. Sigurd Olson attended Northland College from 1916-18. The small private college never lost sight of this former student, who became one of the foremost U.S. conservationists.

In 1971, shortly after the first Earth Day, Sigurd and Sen. Gaylord Nelson were speakers at an environmental conference at Northland – a conference that ultimately paved the way to the college’s unique environmental mission and to creation of the institute charged with developing a citizenry of environmental stewards.

The institute – or SOEI as it is known – acts like Northland’s “extension office for the environment, educating the public on issues” and training the next generation of land stewards, says Executive Director Mark Peterson. “We’re a division of the college. We work to get information out in the Lake Superior region. We are focused more outward rather than inward.”

SOEI’s mission, Mark says, can be loosely organized around four “Ws” – Woods, Water, Wildlife and Wildness.

Such an environmental mission resonated with Sigurd in 1971, when the then 73-year-old was asked if the institute could carry his name. He agreed, and in 1972, the Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute opened its doors.

Immediately plunging into community education on environmental issues, one of SOEI’s first initiatives was a workshop on land use and zoning – not a light-weight topic for a new organization.

Forty years later, Sigurd’s belief that wilderness is intertwined with and intrinsic to our humanity carries on at both the college and the institute.

“He knew that developing a love of the land was central to its preservation and that a deep connection to the natural world must call us to action,” Northland College President Michael Miller says of Sigurd Olson.

Over the years, SOEI has evolved by initiating its own programs – such as LoonWatch – and serving as a home for other like-minded organizations and activities – such as the Lake Superior Binational Forum. It also has provided ample opportunities for Northland students to make practical use of their blossoming skills

The Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute (right), named for the renown conservationist (top) is tucked near the student center on the Northland College Campus in Ashland, Wisconsin.

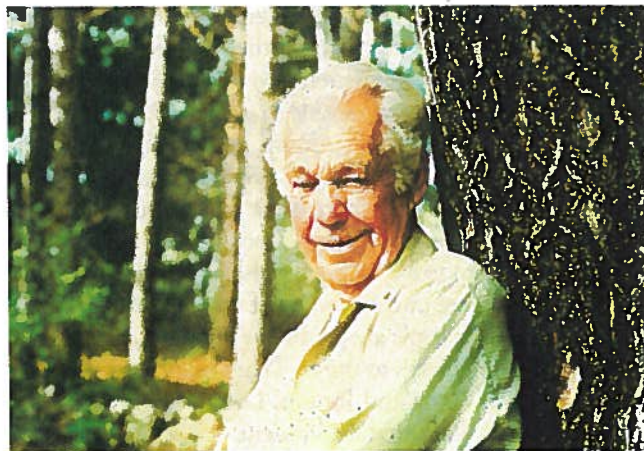
Facing page: SOEI intern for four years, Madeline Weibel leads a cleanup crew near Washburn, Wisconsin.

and engages residents, students and faculty in informed dialogues on complex environmental and social issues.

“In the spirit of Sigurd,” Mike says, “the institute continues to assume the role of convener, educator, partner, servant, expert and encourager. The Institute connects knowledge and theory with action and passion towards solutions ...”

SOEI and Northland College, with its environmental focus, sprouted from the visionary ideas of the college’s 1970s leaders, Mark says. “Malcolm McLean (Northland’s president at the time) recognized we needed to be training the next generation in environmental stewardship.”

Mark has been part of SOEI’s history twice. He first directed it from 1984 to 1991, when he left to pursue a doctoral degree in human dimensions of natural resources at Colorado State University. He then worked for the National Parks Conservation Association and as the



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF NORTHLAND COLLEGE / THE SIGURD OLSON ENVIRONMENTAL INSTITUTE



Minnesota state director for the Audubon Society. Last year the director's position opened again, and Mark and his wife, Erica, got their chance to come back to the Big Lake. Mark also was pleased with the progress SOEI had continued since 1991 and was impressed with the Northland president's commitment to the institute and its mission. He was particularly pleased to see so many of the programs started during his first tenure continuing today.

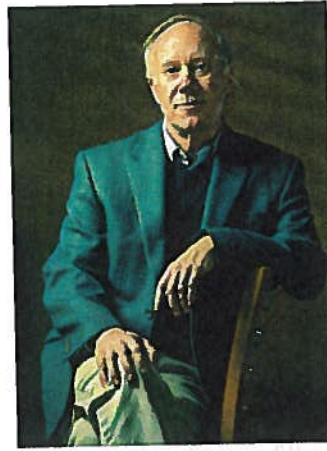
Project LoonWatch, started in 1978, is a particular favorite of the former Audubon executive. The institute helped to develop LoonWatch to protect loons and loon habitat through education, monitoring and research. It's typical of what SOEI tries to do. Part of LoonWatch's goal is to restore loons to their historic Midwest breeding range, which once extended south into northern Iowa, Illinois and Indiana but has shrunk to breeding only in the northern two-thirds of Wisconsin, Minnesota and Michigan.

LoonWatch relies on recruiting volunteer citizen scientists – known as “Loon Rangers” – who monitor loons annually and participate in the five-year loon population survey. LoonWatch also lends out its “Get the Lead Out” display materials to educate anglers about the dangers of lead tackle for loons and other waterfowl.

LoonWatch coordinator Erica LeMoine has been fascinated by loons since hearing their distinctive call on family camping trips in northern Wisconsin. The program brings together students, the public and government agencies to promote understanding of what makes healthy lakes, Erica says. “People are passionate about loons, and loons need healthy lakes to thrive. That's really exciting.”

For interns Anna and Jordan, LoonWatch means an opportunity to share that excitement.

“It's cool to be part of this program,” Jordan says. “Our job changes daily. We may be writing articles for a



newsletter, or working on a poster for Loon Appreciation Week, or making loon capes for presentations.”

In the spring, the interns don those black-and-white dotted capes to visit area schools and to talk about loons.

Another program started in 1987 and housed at SOEI until 2008, Timber Wolf Alliance, has since moved to Manitowish Waters, but the program continues to educate about wolves – another point of pride for Mark. “When the alliance started, there was just a handful of wolves in northern Wisconsin,” he says. “And now, we have a wolf population that is sustaining a hunt.”

Through research, Sigurd Olson himself changed, says Mark, from “being anti-wolf to having a better understanding of their role in the ecosystem ... and add an element of beauty in our lives.”

Since 1992, SOEI also has served as home to the Lake Superior Binational Forum, which works across national boundaries for the health of the greatest of the Great Lakes. The forum tackles issues from the lakewide management plan to education on invasive species, climate change education and mining issues.

SOEI is a compatible host for the forum's offices and programs, says Lissa Radke. “The institute sets a neutral stage ... that encourages fair and transparent discussions that give people a chance to listen, learn, and offer feedback.”

Both SOEI and the forum prefer to present information to help people make decisions. “Neither group advocates for one perspective, but rather tries to find the best information available to understand complex issues and build a sustainable future,” Lissa says. “We wade into controversy, take information and feedback from all sides, and try to find the common ground or actions that can create best possible outcomes.”

“We want to be part of getting out the full spectrum of information, pro and con,” Mark says, referring to the contentious issue of locating an



LoonWatch interns Anna Hipke-Krueger, left, and Jordan Wellnitz lean on a black-and-white “loon costume” that they crafted for public programs. Top: Mark Peterson returned to his position as SOEI director last year.

Sigurd F. Olson

April 4, 1899 - January 13, 1982

Sigurd Ferdinand Olson was born in the bustling city of Chicago, but became known as a defender of the wilderness after developed his lifelong love of the outdoors as a boy on the Wisconsin shores of Lake Superior.

His family moved to Ashland in 1912, where his Swedish immigrant father served as a Baptist minister. After high school, Sigurd attended Northland College for two years, both as a boy and a college student, he spent a great deal of his time fishing, hunting and enjoying nature. He finished his studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, graduating in 1920 with a bachelor's degree in agriculture. Later, at the University of Illinois he would earn a master's degree in animal ecology in 1932.

A year after he graduated from UW, he married Elizabeth Dorothy Uhrenholdt and they had two sons.

He taught biology at what was then Ely Junior College in Ely, Minnesota, and ran an outfitting business serving the Boundary Waters, a region he grew to love for its unspoiled wilderness. He was named dean of that community college in 1936, a post he left in 1947 to devote himself full time to writing.

In 1956, when Olson was 57, his first book, *The Singing Wilderness*, was published and became a *New York Times* bestseller.

Over the next 30 years, he went on to write numerous magazine articles and eight more books, including *Listening Point*, *The Hidden Forest*, and *Reflections of the North Country*. In 1974, he was presented with the highest honor in nature writing – the John Burroughs Medal from the John Burroughs Association.

Sigurd was not a stranger to honors. He won the highest awards from the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, the National Wildlife Federation and the Izaak Walton League.

He became vice president of the Wilderness Society in 1963 and was named its president in 1968, holding that post until 1971. During that time he helped draft the federal



Sigurd Olson loved being in the area near the U.S.-Canada border that would become the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.

Wilderness Act and was influential in establishing Voyageurs National Park in Minnesota, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska and Point Reyes National Seashore in California. In 1978 he saw his beloved Boundary Waters become the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.

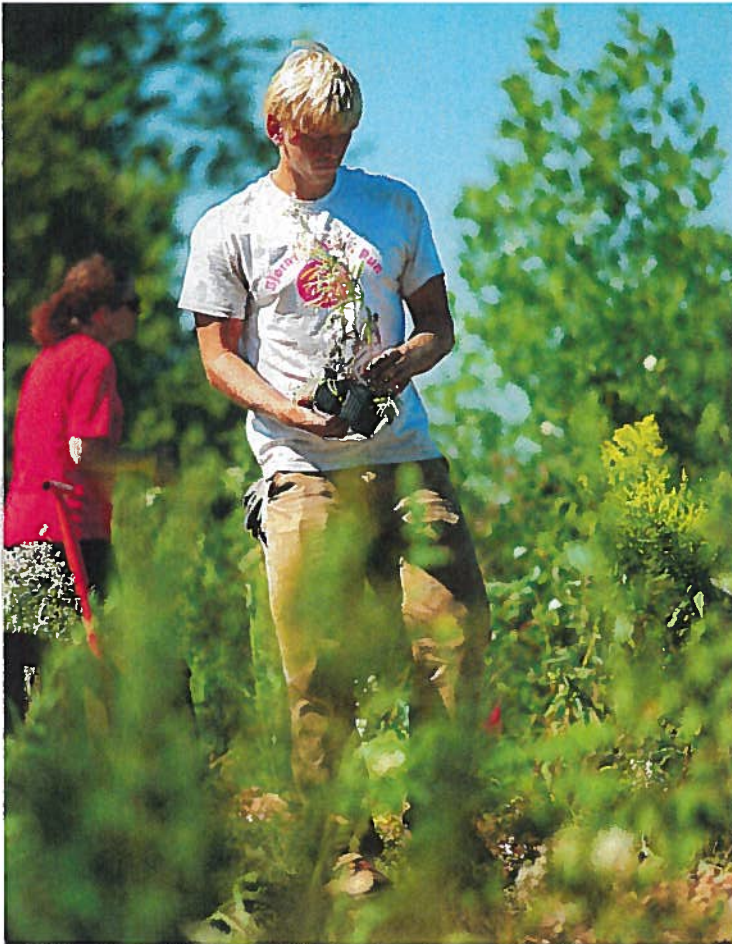
Good to Know

Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute
1411 Ellis Ave., Ashland, Wisconsin 54806-3999
715-682-1699, Northland.edu

"Facing Climate Catastrophe with Hope: Rediscovering the Olson Way," a presentation by David Backes will be at 6-9:30 p.m. April 4 in SOEI. David is author of *A Wilderness Within: The Life of Sigurd F. Olson*.

"The preservation of wilderness is a humanitarian effort based on the knowledge that man has lived in a natural environment for some 2 million years and that his physiological and psychic needs come from it."

– Sigurd Olson from "What is Wilderness?" in *Living Wilderness*, 1968



Top: an SOEI intern guides a mechanized cleaner along the shore of Chequamegon Bay to clean debris from the shore. A project of the Chequamegon Bay Area Partnership, the cleanup, along with beach surveys, were completed with funding from the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. Left: Interns seed native plants as part of the Ashland Restoration Project on the city's bayfront.

iron ore mine in southern Ashland County in the Lake Superior watershed.

"Mining is a sentinel issue for the region," Mark says. "It speaks to how we value and wish to allocate our natural resources. We need to be a voice for all the resources and help our society be intentional in the courses we take."

A new project at the institute is creation of an Applied Research and Environmental Laboratory with a chemist who will provide services to private citizens and natural resource managers. Northland faculty will train students to analyze environmental samples for water quality, soil nutrients and other factors. The data will be used as a baseline for studies and projects.

The lab creates another area where the college and the institute can combine efforts, says the college president. "This development is exciting on so many levels, including student learning, faculty research opportunities, institute assistance to agencies and land owners, and our engagement in issues of importance in the region."

A recent program to settle at the institute is the Chequamegon Bay Area Partnership, a collaboration of 13 federal, state and local agencies, tribes, municipalities, nonprofit organizations and education institutions to advance shoreline and habitat restoration projects using federal Great Lakes Restoration Initiative funds.

The partnership has undertaken such projects as watershed restoration in the Fish Creek and Marengo rivers, working directly with landowners. It also organizes beach cleanups and surveys.

The partnership again gives the important opportunity for involvement by the college students.

Northland student Katie Drzod, a freshman from the Chicago suburbs, worked as an intern on a beach cleanup from June to September 2012.

Katie says she gained experience in "hard, hands-on work and physical labor, working with others in large groups to strategize and accomplish tasks, and a taste for what a job can be like, which includes the responsibilities while being on the job and handling unexpected situations."

"A typical day consisted of loading our tools at the start of the day, driving to our location, then assessing the condition of the beach and planning the best way to clean it," she says. That could mean anything from lightly raking leaves and picking up trash to heavier removal of the wet sawdust frequent in Ashland and Washburn and churned onshore from old timber mill activity.

They also learn about managing beaches, encouraging people not to feed and attract birds like gulls and geese, the droppings of which can cause health hazards and increased bacterial growth on the sawdust of local beaches, Katie says.

Like interns Anna and Jordan, Katie came away with an enthusiasm for working together to make the environment and community better.

Students like them, says Mark, will be tomorrow's leaders. Today they are part of the institute's and the college's "responsibility to produce students who are going to change the world," he adds.

"If you work in conservation, the struggle to protect a region is endless. Just when you get something better managed or conserved, a new issue arises."

"We need to equip students to face challenges in all situations – the institute's experiential education gives them the head knowledge and the heart knowledge to work together," says Mark. "Even a small college can have a major impact on the world."



Claire Duquette is a lifelong regional journalist who lives in Washburn.