

BOOK REVIEW

# Laurance S. Rockefeller *Catalyst for Conservation*

by Robert McDermott



## Laurance S. Rockefeller *Catalyst for Conservation*



ROBIN W. WINKS

Robin W. Winks, professor and chair of the Department of History at Yale University, begins his substantial study *Laurance S. Rockefeller: Catalyst for Conservation* (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1997), by describing a ceremony in the White House on September 27, 1991, at which President George Bush presented Mr. Rockefeller the Congressional Medal of Honor for his lifelong contribution to the environment. Since this medal was first awarded to George Washington in 1777, it has been awarded only one hundred times. Laurance S. Rockefeller is the only recipient to have been awarded this medal for contributions to the environment.

Bill Moyers remarked that "Mr. Conservation' will long be remembered as one of the great environmentalists of our time"; Bruce Babbitt stated that "Laurance Rockefeller has done more for American conservation than any citizen since John Muir." Robin Winks's carefully researched account of Laurance S. Rockefeller's contributions to conservation demonstrates that these comments are not overstated.

When I first met Mr. Rockefeller on July 30, 1990, two weeks after being offered the position of president of CIIS, I knew of him only as a member of the family of legendary wealth and as a philanthropist. After meeting with him and Elizabeth McCormack on two subsequent days, I assumed that his entire work was focused on education in service of a set of ideals which he referred to alternately as "the new paradigm" and "body, mind, and spirit." This narrow perspective on LSR was reinforced by the list of grantees in the Bay Area, all exponents of new paradigm thinking. Some of these recipients were

ecologically minded but none of them was involved in creating, expanding, or preserving national parks.

My first introduction to LSR the conservationist came in spring 1993 when my wife Ellen and I were guests at a hotel he had built in 1965, the Mauna Kea Hotel, on the Kohola Coast, on the west side of the Big Island, Hawaii. When he spoke at the dedication of the Mauna Kea, he began with a prayer:

*May we all find inspiration in the majesty of the sea and the beauty of the surrounding mountains. May we learn again the joy of living and that good will is the key to brotherly love. May we recognize again that material goods are but the means—stepping stones to the spiritual meaning and purpose of life (p. 70).*

The hotel was designed to be in a positive relationship to the ecology of the Kohola coast. During our stay we came to appreciate the farsighted, ecologically sensitive vision of the creator of the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel, which integrates three of LSR's lifelong passions: nature, art, and business, and a fourth which makes the integration possible—a spiritual perception of the entire process and result.

Robin Winks's book does not focus explicitly on the spiritual dimension of LSR's contributions to conservation, but once we know about this dimension it is easy to read it into this chronicle of his dedication to nature, to beauty, and to a sustainable planet. The book focuses, thoroughly and with insight, on LSR's ability to bring to time-sensitive ecological problems which emerged in the second half of the twentieth century a rare combination of business acumen, social skills, and a deep commitment to conservation and ecology. Wink concludes a chapter on LSR's singular contribution to the creation and preservation of national parks with the following summation:

*At a time when politics, social expectations, race relations, and the very fabric of (continued on p. 3)*

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## Laurance S. Rockefeller *(continued from facing page)*

*life was increasingly polarized, he persisted in a search for a middle path, for compromise between commerce and conservation (p. 119).*

It was his integration of business and conservation, both served by his unfailing integrity and good judgment, which enabled LSR to serve so successfully as chair of the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission (ORRRC). Under LSR's leadership, beginning in 1958, the ORRRC created the first federal recreation policy, shifted attention to recreation close to cities, created the concept of multiple use for recreational lands, significantly increased federal purchases of land for recreation, and

increased cooperation between federal and state governments.

In addition to his leadership of ORRRC, numerous historic properties and park lands owe their creation, expansion, or survival to his vision and generosity. These properties and parks include Grand Teton National Park, Virgin Islands National Park, Haleakala National Park, Kykuit (a family home in New York State), Williamsburg Historic District, and Palisades Interstate Park. Wink concludes his study with the well substantiated conclusion that "LSR was a major force in bringing conservation to the prominent place on the public agenda it now holds. ▼"