

Community Shares of Wisconsin Recognizes Erin O'Brien 2010 Linda Sundberg Civil Rights Defender Award



Photo by Craig Brabant

"Wetlands keep our lakes, rivers, and drinking water supplies clean. They prevent shoreline erosion and provide places to hunt and fish. And they store and slowly release rain and snowmelt. You only need to look as far back as the 2008 floods to see how wetland loss affects communities. For me and for many other people, wetlands are a quality of life issue and a justice issue. Our environment doesn't have a voice unless we provide one."

— Erin O'Brien

Erin O'Brien's grassroots advocacy work, to help protect Wisconsin's wetlands, symbolizes more than her environmental leadership. Her skills—enabling people to raise their voices in support of conservation issues—extend to the arenas of civil rights, human health, and safety.

"Citizen advocates who hold an unpopular viewpoint are in an unenviable position," said Erin, Wetland Policy Director at Wisconsin Wetlands Association (WWA). "It's lonely, hard work. But they do it because they are dedicated to helping protect the natural wetlands in their communities." If and when those citizens succeed, it's very often because Erin has provided them with the tools, the basic knowledge, and the insights into navigating the arduous path toward environmental protection. It's also because she is committed to empowering them, often providing ongoing support during a process that can take years. Equally important, Erin's dogged work has helped strengthen state rules and regulations governing wetlands.

Every week, WWA receives several inquiries from people around the state who are concerned about the fate of a local wetland that is threatened by an illegal fill or by adjacent construction. Erin works with these citizens and provides one-on-one consultation throughout their process.

"Erin succeeds not only because of her dedication but because of her tenacity," said Becky Abel, Executive Director of WWA. "And the complexity of the work is daunting. She takes incredibly complex policies at the federal, state, county, and local levels and distills them into understandable guidelines for our citizen-advocates. She does a great job of making all of this rather convoluted information understandable, so that people can move forward to protect the land and water that's important to them."

In one project, for example, Erin helped grassroots advocates in Washington County who opposed an airport expansion that would involve destroying 66 acres of wetlands, and clearing trees from another 88 acres.

There was a robust public participation in that project, which is our goal," said Erin. Pointing out that neither WWA nor the citizens' groups expected the decision-makers to oppose the plan, Erin said, "we simply pushed to get a conversation going among all

interested parties —community leaders, affected landowners, concerned neighbors, and staff from the Environmental Protection Agency, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the DNR. We suggested meeting at the wetlands that were slated to be destroyed. And we were pleasantly surprised that the key decision-makers said yes to the meeting. They had been making decisions based on what was on paper, but we wanted them to see what was at stake. That meeting at the wetlands was the turning point in their review process. It took several more years, but the wetlands were ultimately preserved."

Becky noted that in many cases Erin's work is not only about strengthening environmental protections, but just making sure that current protections are enforced.

For instance, when construction of a lengthy pipeline was approved to cross 262 rivers and 1,200 acres of wetlands, a request by WWA for judicial review was dismissed. Undeterred, Erin poured through daily environmental monitoring reports. "She was simply trying to make sure that our environmental protections, required by law, were kept in place as the pipeline was built," Becky explained.

After hundreds of instances of environmental non-compliance became evident, Erin used the media and direct communications to push for prosecution. Eventually the DNR referred the case to the Department of Justice. "As a result of Erin's steadfast work, and her regular communication with the DNR, pipeline development is now held to a higher standard, and our waterways are better protected," said Becky. "More impressive, her efforts have implications beyond our state boundaries. Her work has given teeth to the current environmental protections and helps ensure enforcement of our laws."

Noting that WWA is Wisconsin's only statewide wetlands group, Becky pointed out that it's also "the only group of its kind in the nation. We're held up as a model in other states for the attention we give to wetlands protection."

Erin agreed, noting that "Wisconsin has a progressive tradition of environmental conservation. Yet when our state first passed groundwater regulations, there was no mention of wetlands. Now wetlands are part of the conversation.

"Our focus is education and advocacy, and those go hand in hand," Erin continued. "When people understand what's at stake, they realize the importance of restoring our wetlands instead of destroying them."

Though we drained or filled half of the wetlands in our state decades ago, Erin pointed out that "today we're much more aware of the important role of wetlands. Wetlands keep our lakes, rivers, and drinking water supplies clean. They prevent shoreline erosion and provide places to hunt and fish. And they store and slowly release rain and snowmelt. You only need to look as far back as the 2008 floods to see how wetland loss affects communities. For me and for many other people, wetlands are a quality of life issue and a justice issue. Our environment doesn't have a voice unless we provide one."

Thanks to Erin's work, many more Wisconsinites understand the value of wetlands and have offered their voices in support of wetlands protection.