

Environmental Professionals Network

[“Last Stand - Ted Turner's Quest to Save a Troubled Planet”](#)

An Evening with Environmental Journalist Todd Wilkinson — A Signature EPN Event

October 25, 2016

I went to this event not having any preconceptions about what I was going to hear. I am old enough to remember when Ted Turner started CNN, owned the Atlanta Braves, and married to Jane Fonda, but that’s all I really knew about him.

Todd Wilkinson painted a full portrait of the man, starting with his childhood in Cincinnati. His father owned a billboard company and was a towering influence in his life. Ted’s father wanted him to take over the billboard business and sent him to college at Brown University. When he found out Ted was majoring in classics instead of business, he sent him this letter:

My dear son,

I am appalled, even horrified, that you have adopted Classics as a major. As a matter of fact, I almost puked on the way home today. ... I am a practical man, and for the life of me I cannot possibly understand why you should wish to speak Greek. With whom will you communicate in Greek? ... I think you are rapidly becoming a jackass, and the sooner you get out of that filthy atmosphere, the better it will suit me. ... You are in the hands of the Philistines, and dammit, I sent you there. I am sorry.

Devotedly,

Dad

Ted took the letter to the student newspaper, which ran it on the front page. But his father withdrew financial support, and Ted had to drop out. His father committed suicide when Ted was 24, putting him in charge of the company. It seems as if a lot of what Turner did for the rest of his life was an effort to live up to his father’s expectations.

From billboards, Turner started buying television stations. When he decided to start CNN in 1980, no one thought a 24-news channel would work. Now for better or worse it created the 24-hour news cycle. CNN was what everyone tuned in to for breaking news events such as the Challenger explosion or first Gulf War. The success led Turner to expand to a series of other cable networks. In 1996 Turner sold Turner Broadcasting to Time Warner for \$7.3 billion. He was named a vice president of the company but was removed from the position in 2000 and resigned completely after Time Warner’s disastrous merger with AOL.

It was at that point Turner began getting into philanthropy and environmental causes. When the United States owed \$1 billion to the United Nations, Turner paid it and started the United Nations Foundation. He worked with former Georgia Sen. Sam Nunn to start the Nuclear Threat Initiative, whose purpose was to rid the world of nuclear weapons. He also became friends with Jacques Cousteau who took him to the Amazon and taught him about climate change. Turner now sees climate change as the most pressing problem facing humanity.

Turner also channeled his money into buying up land in the west. He became the largest private landowner in the country, with 28 properties, including 17 ranches in Nebraska, Kansas, Montana, New Mexico and South Dakota, totaling almost 2 million acres.

On these ranches Turner pioneered many conservation practices. When he heard about millions of cattle dying in winter, he removed cattle from his Flying D Ranch in Montana and brought in bison. Bison are the original inhabitants and evolved to deal with winter. They are heartier than cattle and have thick undercoats. Turner's bison herd is second in size only to Yellowstone. In an effort to show bison herds can pay for themselves, Turner started Ted's Montana Grill to sell bison meat. The first restaurant was opened in Columbus, and it's now a nationwide chain.

Turner also supported prairie dogs. He brought 15,000 prairie dogs onto his Flying D ranch in Montana; they now number 300,000. Most ranchers consider prairie dogs a scourge. Although they numbered 6 billion at the time of Lewis and Clarke, ranchers killed almost all of them off because they think prairie dog dens are hazardous for cattle. Turner proved this was wrong.

Turner also proved that bison can co-exist with wolves. He was ecstatic when a pack of wolves came onto the Flying D ranch from Yellowstone, and let them stay. Conventional wisdom was the presence of predators would stress out prey species so much that they would not reproduce, but the bison herd grew even with the wolves, now one of the largest packs in the country.

Wilkinson said Turner sees his ranches as modern-day ark. There is habitat for 150 species, some of them rare and endangered such as the leopard frog, red woodpecker, and Bolson tortoise. Many of these ranches provide ecotourism, as people pay to howl with wolves or watch millions of bats emerge from a cave on Turner's ranch in New Mexico. Turner is working with the Nature Conservancy to put his properties in a conservation easement so they are preserved forever.

It was interesting to hear about Turner's life and the conservation programs he has put into practice on his vast amount of land. I have somewhat mixed feelings about it overall though. Wilkinson doesn't seem to mind that Turner is so incredibly wealthy – he says we have to get people of means on board if we want to transition to a sustainable future.

While that is true, I can't help but think that the future of the planet should not have to rely on the whims of rich people, some of whom understand the serious problems our environment faces, but many of whom have no conception and don't want to know because it could cut into their profits. So much of our economy depends on industries that extract natural resources, and the incentives are to extract more and more with no thought as to the limits of growth. People who are made wealthy by these industries have no incentive to change them.

People like Ted Turner who will spend money to leave land in better shape than they found it are few and far between. Rather than leaving the fate of the planet to the whims of who gets rich and who doesn't, it seems to me like we need to be passing laws and regulations that take the limits of nature into account and require sustainable practices and conservation of land and water. We also need to be moving toward less inequality among people, and a society in which more people are middle class and fewer are extremely rich – and it sounds like Turner believes that too.

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