

Rockefeller Jr.: A Natural Philanthropist

An Interview with David Rockefeller Jr.,
Director, Rockefeller & Co., Inc., New York



David Rockefeller Jr.

EDITORS' NOTE Although deeming himself "lucky enough" to have participated in running a successful business – and to have enjoyed doing so – David Rockefeller eschews the nomenclature "businessman," for the simple reason that, as he puts it, "it isn't where my heart is." Rather, while others seek fulfillment within the four walls of an office, Rockefeller prefers to indulge his deep-seated "passion for nature," which was first nurtured during family holidays in the "beautiful natural settings" of Maine and Wyoming. Following another long family tradition – that of pursuing philanthropy and good works – he has channeled his enthusiasm for the great outdoors into a number of worthy causes, the most demanding of which concern protecting Alaska's outstanding natural beauty and, beyond that, the ocean itself. For "the ocean faces serious threats," Rockefeller vigorously points out, noting the growing problems associated with "pollution runoff from the land and declining fish populations." Such issues must be tackled with "a national ocean policy and better ocean governance structures," he believes, not least because up to 200 miles out, the ocean is public property and "clean water shouldn't stop at the shore." To facilitate these changes, "ocean fishermen, sailors, and other people who use the sea recreationally" must

build "a greater voice for the ocean," Rockefeller declares, and, as an avid sailor himself, he is willing to take the lead in this "important" endeavor.

Among his numerous activities in the nonprofit arena, Rockefeller is vice chair of the National Park Foundation; a founder of the Alaska Fund for the Future; a trustee of the Asian Cultural Council and of the Museum of Modern Art; a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; a founding trustee of the Cantata Singers in Boston, with whom he has performed for 40 years; and a founder of Recruiting New Teachers, an organization dedicated to improving the quality and diversity of U.S. teachers. A graduate of Harvard College and of Harvard Law School, Rockefeller is a former chair and current board member of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and additionally serves on the Council on Foreign Relations.

You are a member of a family that has always had a great interest in public service. How do you budget your time?

I was chairman of Rockefeller & Co. – our financial-services company – for seven years, and I now sit on the board, which is a reasonably active one. However, these days I spend much of my time at the "family fabric" level, if you will, rather than actually running the family company. As an example, I am involved in helping to determine the future of our family property in Westchester County [New York], Pocantico Hills, which is a jointly held property where the family convenes. I am also involved in determining how much collective family office space we need in New York, and, along with other cousins, I help to decide what kind of activities should be included in family gatherings.

You are known for your commitment to a number of good causes, one of which is the preservation of ocean life. Why the ocean?

Because of my passion for nature. In the last decade, I have dedicated a lot of my volunteer time to both national parks and ocean conservation, principally within

U.S. waters, but my interest goes beyond that. I am also involved in the protection of the state of Alaska. I think the origins of my passion for these causes date back to early family vacations on the coast of Maine and Mount Desert Island. Our family has vacationed on the coast of Maine for 100 years, and we also spent summers in Wyoming. I don't think you can spend time in such beautiful natural settings and not feel a strong connection with nature. It certainly had an impact on me. I'm a sailor and a hiker. I love to pull the lines of a sailboat and connect to the force of the wind, and I love to hike and feel the complexity of the terrain underfoot.

However, until I went to Alaska in 1991 on a sailing trip, I didn't do much about my love of nature, besides have fun on the surface of the ocean and the trails of the mountains of Maine and Wyoming. When I came back from that trip, I felt that more people than just Alaskans needed to feel ownership of, and responsibility for, Alaska. More than 50 percent of Alaska is federal land, so I think more people need to watch out for its future. I helped form an organization called the Alaska Fund for the Future, now absorbed into the Alaska Conservation Foundation.

What is your end goal for the world's oceans?

The oceans are so important, but because nobody lives there, no one takes particular responsibility for their care. If you live next to a beautiful park – as many people do in New York – you develop a proprietary relationship with it. The Central Park Conservancy was born from the passion New Yorkers feel for that park, especially those who rent and own properties nearby. Even though some of us are lucky enough to have ocean-side properties, we don't think that we own the ocean. In fact, the ocean is part of America up to 200 miles offshore. But the ocean faces serious threats, such as pollution runoff from the land and declining fish populations due to overfishing and bad fishery practices. Consequently, I believe that we need to rise up and say, "Wait a minute! This is public property and we

need to take greater care of this beautiful and important place.” In my view, we need a national ocean policy and better ocean governance structures – and fisheries management in particular. We need laws that recognize that clean water shouldn’t stop at the shore. We need clean oceans as well as clean streams. So we certainly need to build a greater voice for the ocean, and that’s a part of what I’m doing.

I’m also involved in starting an organization called Sailors for the Sea, which will be similar to Surfrider and Reefkeeper. Recreational fishermen have organized to protect their fishery habitat, but sailors have not yet done the same. So I decided to take on that task and build a public constituency in support of the ocean. I believe that ocean fishermen, sailors, and other people who use the sea recreationally can act as the ocean’s saviors.

But while water may be protected in one part of the world, in another, pollution and overfishing could still be a problem. How can this be solved on a worldwide basis?

It’s true that this problem is not contained within U.S. borders, which extend 200 miles out into the ocean. Some of the key issues are being tackled globally, through a number of international agreements concerning the protection of whales, tuna, swordfish, and other large migratory fish.

Some countries have abused those agreements. In the long run, this could be dangerous to people.

Yes. Each country needs to define the proper radius of its activities, and then work as well as it can within that framework. If the United States were to develop a national ocean policy that was a model of good ocean management and stewardship, we could then speak with a credible voice on the international stage and urge other nations to follow it. Several nations “down under” have much better practices than the United States, and frankly, we should follow their example. But I do think the United States should also be a model in this area, so that we have the moral authority to lead. If we can’t be a model, then we can’t lead.

Will you take that lead personally?

To some extent, although I’m not an expert in international fishing regulations. There’s no doubt that the United States is playing an important role in establishing the necessary international agreements. China has come on board with these regulations too, and that’s important. There are 1.2 billion people in China, and as their incomes rise, they will eat even more fish per capita than they eat now. Where will they get it? The fish stocks in the open ocean were depleted by 90 percent within 15 years of the introduction of the factory trawls and factory ships. Man has a great capacity to ruin things,

even at the scale of the ocean. We’ve got to stop that.

You must be frustrated.

Some days, yes. But when I see the ocean, I’m renewed by its glory and that gives me the energy to do this very, very hard work.

It’s sometimes difficult to make others see the light when they are motivated by politics and constituencies.

Yes, that’s true. There are some political forces that don’t want to zone or regulate the ocean because it has been such a great playground. First come, first served

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is the rule out there. If you have a boat and the money to fuel it, you can fish almost anywhere you like. Imagine if farming were done that way. I could drive my tractor down the road to someone else’s farm and harvest their corn. That’s how the ocean is being treated right now and it can’t go on.

Do you plan to solve some of these problems within a certain time frame?

Yes. There’s a wonderful organization called the Center for Sea Change, based in Arlington, Virginia, which is run by many of the staff of the Pew Oceans Commission, on which I sat for three years. Their goal is to get some important federal and state regulations passed within the next 5 to 10 years that seriously improve the oversight of oceans. The first thing we need is a national ocean policy act and I think we’ll see one in 5 to 10 years.

You seem to be more relaxed than your father and uncles, who were very distinguished and often formal. Is that just your nature?

I don’t know. My parents were wonderful models. My mother, who sadly died eight years ago, was a cattlemoan at the end of her life. That was her great love. She was very loyal to my dad and was wonderfully supportive of him, but it wasn’t her favorite thing to go to bank meetings in Hong Kong. So I think we children learned how to find pleasure in the simpler things in life from her. She

taught us that you don’t have to be in a black tie to enjoy life.

What advice would you offer young people who might look up to you not only as a Rockefeller but also as an advocate and philanthropist?

First, find out what really interests you in life, and then dig in and discover a lot about it. Become an expert or, at least, become very well informed. As much as it is economically possible, follow the things you really care about in life and work with people you like. Try to craft a career or a life path that is meaningful, and then the energy will flow naturally. If you only do the things you think you ought to do, it will always be a struggle to get up in the morning. However, if you have a great project that you love – whether it’s your garden, your children, your business, or your sport – you won’t have trouble getting up. So follow your passion. Go deep, work hard, and always be open to learning. The world is so interesting and so full of information about people, nature, and the mechanics of things. Never stop learning.

Also, remember that we all get down sometimes, so make good friends, because friends support you and they probably won’t be down when you are. So don’t be shy about going to them for support, and they’ll also come to you.

You seem to be so happy, calm, and well organized.

Yes, at least superficially.

There must be something that annoys you.

I get impatient with people who seem to throw their lives away, who have a talent or the advantage of wealth and make nothing of it.

Do you have a home in Alaska?

No, I don’t. I like to live as lightly on the land as I can. Wealthy people have a tendency to proliferate homes, and I don’t think that’s a good trend in terms of protecting the land. So I’d rather stay in a rented cabin somewhere. My attachment to Alaska is strong, spiritual, and primal. I brought 200 friends up there in 1991 and it transformed a majority of their lives. When you sail along the coast of Alaska, you see 18,000-foot mountains within 10 miles of the shore and huge tidewater glaciers crashing down and forming icebergs. Whales come right up next to your boat and bears roam the beach – you can see huge paw prints in the sand. Alaska is very wild, and man doesn’t control it.

Are you more a spiritualist than a businessman?

Yes, I think so. That’s my core nature. I wouldn’t define myself as a businessman, although I’ve been lucky enough to participate in running a business and I enjoyed it. But it isn’t where my heart is.

You seem to have no ego.

Oh, that’s not true. Just talk to my wife and my friends. ●