



David Yarnold

EDITORS' NOTE David Yarnold has held his current post since 2010. Previously, he was Executive Director of Environmental Defense Fund. He is a former Pulitzer Prize-winning Executive Editor of the San Jose Mercury News. He also is a marathoner and an earnest birder. Yarnold is a graduate of San Jose State University. He has balanced Audubon's nearly \$90-million budget for the first time in 14 years.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF National Audubon Society (audubon.org) is one of the largest and best-known conservation organizations in the world. Audubon saves birds and their habitats throughout the Americas using science, advocacy, education, and on-the-ground conservation. Audubon's network of 463 chapters, 22 state programs, 44 nature centers, and partners reaches millions of people each year to inform, inspire, and unite diverse communities in conservation action. Since 1905, Audubon's vision has been a world in which people and wildlife thrive. More than 2,500 Audubon-designated Important Bird Areas identify, prioritize, and protect vital bird habitats from coast to coast. "Citizen scientists" collect vital data through Audubon's annual Christmas Bird Count and other initiatives, generating groundbreaking analyses and guiding scientists and policy makers in addressing the needs of birds and other wildlife.

Why did you join the National Audubon Society?

The power of the brand and its conservation mission, its history of success, and the fact that it was a distributed network – it was a social network before there were social networks.

It's community-based conservation, which is where change really happens. People know what Audubon stands for, and it was a turnaround – in most areas, there was nowhere to go but up.

In terms of the turnaround, did the people take to it quickly?

The organization had wandered away from its core mission, which is large-scale conservation through birds, and most of the organization wanted to get back to that mission and so did the board. I wasn't introducing a new idea – it was about coming home. People like coming back to a mission that is close to their hearts.

Community-Based Conservation

An Interview with David Yarnold,
President and Chief Executive Officer, National Audubon Society

Are you engaging a younger audience?

It's important to build that next generation of conservation leaders. One of the first things we did was to make sure we were upgrading everything we did in terms of social media and engaging younger people. In my first fall, a movie came out about birders called *The Big Year*. I felt this could be our 15 minutes of fame – that we should do right by birders.

We conducted an online scavenger hunt where we put playing cards featuring birds on 100 different websites ranging from Slate to Facebook, and people collected these and competed, and we called it Birding the Net. We got 10,000 new names and e-mail addresses – most weren't long-time birders. Our e-mail file has grown from 15,000 in 2011 to more than 500,000 today. So we know, increasingly, we will talk to people through mobile devices and online.

Are your corporate partnerships evolving?

Through our six-year-old corporate partnership with Toyota, we have involved more than 400,000 people in community-based conservation, and it was important to solidify that.

We also created a partnership with the company that provides most of the conservation mapping software in the world – Esri, from California – and they gave us software for every chapter in America, which was unprecedented.

Conservation organizations have used Esri software just as the CIA does and every land-use planner in America does. However, no conservation organization had ever gotten a software license for a network of 470 chapters and 10 hemispheric partners. It helped us with our priority to put technology at the center of our reinvention.

You also launched Audubon en Español. What impact has that had?

America is changing and conservation groups aren't changing fast enough – it was really important to make that statement and for people to know that we intend to remain relevant in the future.

We also were remaking our board at the same time. We have 27 board members; we have added 13 new members over the past three years and nine of them are in the Southwest or on the West Coast. This was a dramatic change because many of these board members represent states that are majority-minority.

How important is the public policy angle?

Public policy is the biggest lever for conservation impact, and one of the great gifts that Audubon has is that 40 percent of our members identify as moderate to conservative – this isn't true of many conservation organizations.

Audubon truly is the proverbial Big Tent. People don't see a contradiction between conservation and energy development, particularly in the West.

So we launched an initiative in 2012 called Conservation Doesn't Have a Party, because there is a perception that conservation belongs to one party – and it doesn't, and never has.

We wanted to test that proposition. When we launched that initiative, 120,000 people signed on over a 10-week period. The best demonstration of our premise is that it was funded by a Texas Republican, and we partnered with a Republican environmental group called ConservAmerica. All of that caught the media's attention because it defied the convenient stereotypes. It was hugely successful. Everywhere I go, people respond to the message that there has to be a middle ground around conservation.

Are you able to put in metrics to track the impact of this work?

Metrics are core in today's world of conservation – it's like any other business. We have a strategic plan that goes from 2011 to 2015 and it states that we will use 64 iconic species to have a positive impact on 118 million acres, and there are five strategic priorities to drive those results. Every one of our projects has 12-month milestones, 24-month milestones, and three- to five-year objectives. We absolutely want to be held accountable.

Will the focus remain consistent?

Yes, it will continue to be conserving large-scale habitats and being a vertically integrated organization where we can work hemispherically – starting with people's backyards. We have enough work to do for the next decade so there is no reason to broaden our mission. If anything, we will focus more rigorously. Organizational discipline is something nonprofits have to demonstrate.

Are there opportunities to partner along with other conservation groups?

Every organization needs to partner – no conservation organization is big enough to do almost anything by itself.

A good example is directing money to rebuild America's Gulf Coast by using the penalty money that BP and others are paying for the Deepwater Horizon tragedy. Audubon works with the National Wildlife Federation, Environmental Defense Fund, Ocean Conservancy, Walton Family Foundation, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and many other groups to begin to put that money to work on the ground. We work in partnership everywhere. ●