

Timothy James (Kohnken) McKay, 1947-2006

by Susie Van Kirk, 2009

A life-long Californian, Tim McKay—naturalist, writer, scholar, historian, environmental advocate—was executive director of the Northcoast Environmental Center (NEC) in Arcata, California from 1976 until his death in 2006. Under his leadership, the NEC became an influential organization in regional campaigns for Wilderness, ancient forests, and salmon, and locally as the umbrella for every grassroots, “friends of” group that took up the gauntlet as advocates for their home watersheds. He was a man of persistence and unswerving dedication to the ecological complexities and beauties of the natural world. McKay was gifted and had an insatiable drive for knowledge and a mind to match, allowing him to absorb, retain, and use information to successfully advocate for wild places, functioning ecosystems, and their associated fauna and flora. His ability with words, his scholarship, his passion, and an uncanny political savvy transformed a fledgling group of the early environmental movement into a force to be reckoned with, and one that has left its mark across the regional landscape. Often under personal attack, including threatening phone calls, McKay responded as a man confident in his position on the issues, always following his favorite rule-to-live-by: "Endless Pressure; Endlessly Applied."

A large man with a commanding presence, McKay appeared to the general public and particularly to those considered his adversaries to be tough and perhaps uncaring about the effects of environmental protection on those whose livelihoods depended on natural resources. On the contrary, he was a very sensitive human being who identified strongly with the natural world, but clearly understood the terrible human as well as environmental toll of unsustainable resource-based industries that could and, in some cases, have impaired not only those resources, but the dependent economies and workers. He did not, however, mince words when the occasion called for it. His long letters-to-the-editor responding to articles in local, state, or national newspapers or his radio Community Comments and ECONews Reports were replete with facts and figures, often citing the literature and when necessary damning those who would manipulate information and people to further corporate profits at the expense of workers and the resource.

Timothy James Kohnken was born on March 19, 1947 in Stockton, California to James D. Kohnken and Mary Whiting Kohnken. The Kohnkens were German, but James was born in Hoboken, New Jersey and spent the better part of his life at sea in the Merchant Marines. The Whitings were from Massachusetts, later Rochester, Minnesota, the home place of Mary's physician father who eventually settled in California. Young Tim spent his early childhood in a rural setting with an assortment of farm animals and pets, gardens and orchards, perhaps giving the boy his first feelings about the world. His father, however, was not satisfied with being a land-lubber and returned to the sea, a divorce followed, and Mary was remarried in 1957 to Tom McKay. The new family settled in Benicia, where Tim was active in his high school, participating in various clubs, writing for the school newspaper, and pursuing his life-long interest in photography. Graduating in 1964, he was, like many young people, unsettled and

dissatisfied with an urge to change things, but unclear what the change should be. Coming from a family of active Republicans, Tim worked for Goldwater and initially supported the Vietnam war, reporting in later years that he couldn't see the forest for the trees, but gradually the more his parents pushed their values on him, the more he shed them. He completed a lack-luster AA degree at Diablo Valley College in the spring of 1967, and then, as he wrote later, "I escaped. I escaped to Humboldt State College...to get away from urban sprawl, the injustice of poverty, racism and general environmental destruction." He soon found, however, that northwestern California had its own set of problems: "The escapee finds no escape as, indeed, the issues go beyond localities."

The lack of direction that he experienced as a teenager shifted dramatically in the late 1960s. Perhaps those family trips during his growing-up years—trips to Yosemite, Lassen, Big Basin, Crater Lake, Yellowstone, and Alaska—were like chickens coming to roost, as he noted many years later: "The sensations of these places and these experiences hold a powerful influence in my life." After his trip to Alaska in 1962, he determined that he needed to live close to "wild places" and returned there in the summer of 1967. His arrival in Humboldt County and its wild places that fall began a personal life and career inspired by his fascination with the beauties and complexities of the natural world and a commitment to protect them.

Despite his precarious financial situation as a Humboldt State student, McKay threw himself into the activist mode that was to characterize the rest of his life. He worked on Eugene McCarthy's presidential campaign, writing to his parents that McCarthy was "about to start a new party and it will sweep America. I am sure." He was disturbed by student apathy. He organized a Humboldt County Chapter of Friends of the Earth and involved himself in anti-war activities including the big rally and strike in the spring of 1970, when the Humboldt State campus was closed. He worked on efforts to reduce the size and scope of the proposed freeway through Arcata, a project that took the house where he was living. His environmental activism was galvanized by important local issues: PG&E's Humboldt Bay nuclear facility, expansion of Redwood National Park, California's first Wilderness bill, the Siskiyou Mountains and its infamous G-O Road, and National Forest management. His association with the Northcoast Environmental Center began in 1975 and the following year, he assumed the directorship, a position he held until his death in 2006.

As the director of the NEC, McKay led this fledgling organization into the environmental fray that swept the region and, in fact, the nation from 1970 well into the 1990s. As chairman of the Western Ancient Forest Campaign in the early 1990s, he traveled extensively, 40,000 miles in 1991. He kept not only supporters, but also adversaries well informed about the issues, writing regularly for the NEC's publication, ECONews; reporting via his weekly ECONews Report on the Humboldt State University radio station, KHSU; airing on a local conservative radio station his regular "Community Comments;" and speaking and writing for various venues, including Congressional hearings and classroom lectures. In 1991 alone, he made six trips to Washington, D.C.

He eventually graduated with a degree in history (not until 1984!), but his registration cards and transcripts reveal his insatiable need for information and the breadth of his interests: aquatic invertebrates, air photo interpretation, photography for naturalists, history of forest

practices, geology, entomology, ornithology, ecology, and geography. He considered photography to be a hobby, but in fact, it was a professional bent. After attending the North American Nature Photography Association meeting in San Diego in 1996, where he was a presenter, he wrote the Association: “Thanks so much for the opportunity to come to the NANPA meeting. I found it to be very inspirational and now I’m haunted with the recurring idea that it’s time to give up eco-action and go back to photography. I got my first camera when I went to Yellowstone and Glacier with my parents when I was ten years old. That was just a Brownie but I was taking 35 mm slides when we went to Alaska when I was 15. At one time I had a goal of photographing every native plant in California....”

Birding was a passion. He loved birds, loved seeing them in the wild, loved writing and talking about them. He participated in the annual Christmas bird counts, collected field guides starting with Roger Tory Peterson’s Field Guide to Western Birds given to him at Mount McKinley National Park on his first trip to Alaska, and had by anybody’s book a good “life list.” In November 1979, McKay and his wife, Chris Jenican, participated in the first natural history trip to China, sponsored by the National Audubon Society. For McKay, birding in Hong Kong, where he added several new birds to his life list, was a memorial highlight of the trip.

He knew his birds and he knew his plants—native plants. His Westhaven yard was his own small research plot, where he observed this natural microcosm of birds, plants, invertebrates (terrestrial and aquatic), and mammals. He wrote well-researched, literature-cited articles and papers on a variety of natural history topics. Weather was very important, as it is to any good naturalist. He maintained a rain gauge at Westhaven and dutifully reported winter rainfall on ECONews Report. And he was an historian with an avid interest in the area around his home place at Westhaven, researching and writing about this local history. He was also a student of global history and economics, applying this knowledge and analysis to make a point when commenting on a particular environmental issue.

McKay was a collector of books, art work, bird and garden lists, historic photographs on postcards, and friends—people in high places, senators and congresspersons, agency personnel, state legislators, commissioners of various stripes, colleagues at all levels of activism, and his home community. Trips to Washington and Sacramento put him in touch with policy makers and colleagues in the national conservation organizations; regionally he traveled extensively to meet with activists working on shared issues; and at home his friends came from all walks of life—birders, native plant enthusiasts, university professors, professionals, enviros, the guy who worked on his house or car, or somebody he just met along the way, all were welcome at the 8th Avenue house in Westhaven. The famous McKay get-togethers celebrated events and friendships and no less enjoyable were the always-clever invitations. The invitation to the 1997 Celebration of the Hydrographic New Year, June 28, was replete with photographs of a gauging station, tailed frog, a plugged culvert, and a road wash-out, apt depictions of rainy Humboldt County, whose water year begins on the first day of July.

His involvement in the environmental movement provided him with almost inexhaustible opportunities for writing and speaking. He was in demand as a speaker in HSU classes, at all manner of conferences on conservation issues, at hearings before commissions and legislative committees, news conferences, and in the public forum. At a Forest Service hearing in 1986,

with his two-year-old son, Forrest, in his arms, he spoke passionately about his concern for the children's future—all children—in a climate that saw the killing of spotted owls and the wearing of yellow ribbons, not only as a tragedy for the environment, but also as a tragedy for timber workers: "What is needed is a climate of mutual respect if there is to be a resolution to this issue, but the climate only seems to be getting hotter."

The depth of McKay's anguish over the lack of environmental justice was evident in his personal papers—handwritten expressions of his frustration and, at times, anger, some of which never went beyond his desk. "Uncle Tim Does Deep Ecology," is one such piece, a very scholarly approach with literature citations, written in response to a book review of Toxic Environmentalists. He wrote in 1986: "When the conservation movement gave birth to the environmental movement in the late sixties, there was hope that different kinds of people would set aside differences and work to end the unsystematic but ever increasing destruction of the biosphere. Hope that there would be different hands or different tasks knowing that the whole of their efforts would be greater than the sum of its parts.

"But the metaphor Toxic Environmentalists' deeper meaning is that the rancorous nature of the debate might just poison the common faith in ecology.

"Should that happen, the hope for putting the doings of human society back into balance with the life support systems of our precious blue planet could be lost.

"We at the NEC are committed to promoting the courage and faith of those who would grope towards the unknown time when that balance is restored...."

His writing ability was not only quality work, it was quantity. No two-paragraph letters or comments to agencies and politicians, but instead, three or four pages, single-spaced, with a bibliography at the end and photocopied papers and articles attached! He wrote quickly, the words and information seemingly flowing onto the pages. His recall of facts and figures was stunning. Even if he didn't have every detail in his head, he knew, amazingly, where to find the information. McKay was a reader. He knew the subject matter and was able to write effectively and accurately on technically complex subjects about forest management, ecology, conservation biology, salmon life histories, timber industry economics, whatever the topic demanded. And he also wrote poetry and prose which revealed his soul.

Coral Woods

Like woods of coral that rise above the sea.
 Great reefs in time.
 Incrusted.
 Broken, but continually growing....
 incrustated slopes of trapper carbon, like Emeralds
 they are redwoods, they are old-growth, pines and cedars...
 even Douglas-firs,
 sponging off the sky.
 Seabirds
 in their crowns,
 sponging off the sea.
 Here the sky, fishes, birds and sea, they dance together,

clearing the waters, filtering the sky
 Great colonies of creatures
 cycling
 up and down
 up and down
 from the waters
 to the sky
 their hopeful
 prayers
 on tiny wings
 and tiny feet,
 collecting
 the elements
 into buds
 and flowers
 to carry on
 the dream
 of eternal life.
 Like great woods
 of corals
 they rise above
 the sea's shore
 vibrating
 with life
 and
 the winds'
 Earth energy.
 And dotted
 with meadows,
 and
 even bears,
 who remember
 the ice,
 roam these
 magic green
 mountains,
 that are washed
 with amethyst sunsets.

Tim McKay and Chris Jenican were married in 1976 and were the parents of Laurel, born July 7, 1981, and Forrest, 23 July 1985. They divorced, but he never remarried although he had serious relationships with women who shared his vision for and love of the natural world. Diagnosed with severe psoriatic arthritis of the feet in the summer of 1983, he lived with constant pain, and the long backcountry hikes he loved became memories. The millennium brought new challenges when the NEC's building at 879 9th Street, Arcata, was destroyed by fire in July 2001. The NEC's extensive library—newspaper articles which McKay saved,

environmental documents, books, and reams of written comments and information—were gone in a matter of hours. It was a traumatic event for the NEC and, personally, for McKay. Trying to salvage the NEC, raise money for rebuilding a state-of-the-art structure, continue his advocacy for environmental justice, and deal with new health issues took its toll. On July 30, 2006, while birding at Stone Lagoon with his loving partner Michele Marta, Tim McKay died, his binoculars around his neck and, no doubt, his field guide at his side.

After his death, McKay's personal papers at his Westhaven home were rescued and archived by Humboldt State University Library archivist Edie Butler and social historian Suzanne Guerra and now reside as the Tim McKay Collection at the University Library in Arcata, California. The following is a sample of some of the major issues in which McKay involved himself as Executive Director of the NEC.

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, published in 1963, is often cited as this country's first call for environmental action. A burning Ohio river and the disappearance of the nation's symbol from its skies were drama that caught the public's attention. In northwestern California, a local Sierra Club group was formed in 1964 to push for creation of a Redwood National Park; an Audubon Chapter followed; and on the Humboldt State University campus, clubs were organized around outdoor recreation and environmental awareness. This was the climate that beckoned Tim McKay as he searched for a place of escape. Landing in Arcata in the fall of 1967, he immersed himself not only in the issues, but also into an activist community with just the mentors he needed. As he wrote at the time, he and his fellow activists wanted nothing more than "justice and a chance to shape our destiny," a destiny that young people often feel the previous generation has poorly chosen for them.

In the fall of 1970, local conservation groups began meeting for the purpose of organizing an umbrella group, the Northcoast Environmental Center, which was formally organized in the spring of 1971. Representatives of these various organizations provided the Board of Directors and the first Executive Director was Wesley Chesbro, now and for some years, a California state legislator. He resigned at the beginning of 1975 and John Amodio became director with Tim McKay as the internal coordinator. With Amodio's departure the following year, McKay became executive director, a position he held for thirty years.

Even prior to his official positions at the NEC, McKay had started a local chapter of Friends of the Earth and one of the early issues was the Siskiyou Mountains, a rugged region of unroaded wilderness with a rare collection of coniferous trees and runs of anadromous fish, all threatened by the Forest Service's timber-management philosophy. This agency's determination to construct a major haul road between Gasquet and Orleans, the G-O Road, galvanized activists for years and resulted in appeals and lawsuits. Environmental issues associated with the G-O Road were favorably decided at the appellate court level, but the rights of Native Americans to practice their spiritual activities in the high country, unimpaired by logging and roads, went to the United States Supreme Court. Although the ruling was unfavorable, the campaigns against the G-O Road and for protection of the Siskiyou Mountains remained strong. McKay was a pivotal player in this effort, along with the Siskiyou Mountains Resources Council and a dedicated activist community. In a letter to Sierra Club Legal Defense attorney, Julie McDonald, in June 1982, McKay wrote that the NEC Board of Directors was agreeable to pursuing litigation (Blue Creek

lawsuit), for the first time in its eleven-year history. To that date, the NEC had filed only one appeal and was prepared to file only its second, both of which were for Forest Service actions in the Siskiyou Mountains—the Eight Mile-Blue Creek EIS and the decision to construct the Chimney Rock section of the G-O Road. With passage of the California Wilderness Bill in 1984 and the creation of the Smith River National Recreation Area in 1990, the long-sought protection that McKay had pursued for more than twenty years was finally realized.

The National Forest Management Act of 1976 directed national forests throughout the country to prepare forest plans that were based on sustained yield of all forest resources, including fish and wildlife. The NEC was a leader in shaping the direction of plans for Six Rivers National Forest, Klamath National Forest, and the Shasta-Trinity. With McKay at the helm, activist groups assumed responsibility for various sections of Alternative J, the More Jobs and More Wilderness alternative, proposed to Six Rivers in 1981. The draft Six Rivers plan gave no serious consideration to the NEC proposal. The resulting backlash was significant enough to cause the Forest Supervisor to withdraw the plan and establish a planning group with representatives from the timber industry, environmental community, and resource agencies to develop a new plan. McKay was part of that planning team and the resulting Six Rivers plan was ecosystem-based. In fact, with the adoption in 1993 of the Northwest Forest Plan for managing national forests throughout the range of the spotted owl, no major changes in the Six Rivers plan were needed to bring it into conformance with this overarching directive.

In 1968, just as McKay was arriving on the northcoast, the first Redwood National Park bill was passed. It included virgin redwood forests, but also logged lands and seashore areas. It was clear to those who worked on that first effort that the compromise legislation was inadequate for protecting Redwood Creek and the Tall Trees Grove, as only a narrow stream corridor was included in the park. Timber companies continued to log and construct roads above the “worm” and in the creek’s headwaters. McKay was part of the activist community that began another campaign to enlarge the Park. HSU students with Rudi Becking as their faculty advisor formed the Emerald Creek Committee. The NEC and McKay were part of the larger effort, led by the Sierra Club’s North Group. Ten years after the initial Redwood National Park, it was enlarged to provide ridge-to-ridge protection for lower Redwood Creek, but even today, private-land management in the headwaters continues outside the protective mandates of national park management.

Logging and roading of national forests throughout the Pacific Northwest and California continued unabated in the 1980s, prompting McKay and other regional forest activists to launch a national effort for ancient forest protection. In the spring of 1991, the Western Ancient Forest Campaign was formed and its first executive director, Arcatan Jim Owens, was sent to Washington, D.C. to open an office. McKay served as the steering committee chair and during that period, he was on the road, in the air, telephoning and faxing at an exhausting pace, traveling more than 40,000 miles. Whether writing in the ECONEWS, reporting on the radio, speaking at conferences, or testifying before legislative committees, McKay advanced the Campaign’s position that the ancient forests are far more than old trees; they are complex systems that sustain ecological processes upon which a myriad of life depends, including the imperiled Pacific salmon.

Increasingly his advocacy for those incomparable fish was manifested in his writing and speaking. In a 1992 letter to staff of the Subcommittee on Parks and Public Lands, McKay talked about conservation successes—the first Earth Day April 22, 1970; passage of the California Coastal Act in 1972; incorporation of California’s Wild and Scenic Rivers into the federal system in 1982; designation of 800,000 acres in California as Wilderness in 1984; creation of the 385,000-acre Smith River National Recreation Area in 1990—but lamented that despite these stunning achievements, “salmon continue to decline.” The remainder of McKay’s environmentalist life and leadership at the NEC was devoted to the salmon. He wrote: “The trail ahead will be rough, and it’s easy to despair, but if we remember the gains made by a dedicated environmental community and stand together, we will tackle the grim issues of plutocracy, dams, alternative energy, water quality, growth, and species loss that top this conservation agenda here and everywhere in the beginning of this new millennium.”

In September 2002, 60,000 adult salmon, migrating upriver to spawn, were found dead and dying on the lower Klamath River, the result of disease brought on by low water and high water temperatures. McKay photographed the scene as it played out on 40 miles of river. This event affected him in a way that perhaps no other had in his more than thirty years of environmental advocacy. His reaction was swift and the pressure for accountability and remedy was strong and public, but the sight of these fish may have triggered a sense of personal loss or maybe failure. He had worked tirelessly during his entire adult life to maintain the ecological processes and beauties of this northern California place he loved and called home, but before him lay the unfulfilled promise of a new generation of salmon, lost forever. Twenty years before he had correctly understood their plight and testified before a Congressional subcommittee: “Simply drawing lines around stands of ancient trees will not address the fisheries crisis that is rapidly emerging.” Reckoning with the reality of Klamath River water politics directed his activism during the last four years of his life. He certainly understood that reality, but not one to quit in the face of adversity, he continued “Endless Pressure; Endlessly Applied.”