

## Obituary - George Rabb



George Rabb (1930 - 2017)

### **George Rabb, influential former Brookfield Zoo director, dies at 87**

Despite running Brookfield Zoo, one of the Chicago area's top tourist attractions, for decades and even living in a house on zoo grounds, George Rabb was probably better known in the international zoo and conservation communities than he was locally.

"He was a quiet, shy, unassuming guy, and I've never in my life seen anybody more respected completely than him," said Joe Mendelson, director of research at Zoo Atlanta and a longtime friend and colleague of Rabb's. "He was absolutely central to the modernization of zoos from animal menageries to conservation and research centers."

Rabb died Thursday at 87 after a brief illness, the zoo said in a statement Thursday night. His legacy, marked throughout his career by bringing scientific methods into his chosen workplace, touches nearly all aspects of modern animal conservation, friends and colleagues said.

Rabb had heart surgery in early July and struggled to recover, Brooke Hecht, president of the Center for Humans and Nature, a Chicago wildlife think tank where Rabb sat on the board, said in a newsletter Friday.

"At some point, at 87 and post-surgery, George's body could no longer keep up with his mind. To those who knew him, this likely comes as no surprise," she wrote, calling him "our dear George Rabb." "I was honored to be with George yesterday when he died.

He leaves behind multitudes inspired by his dedication to conservation as caring, the importance of global citizenship and, yes, the dream of a world environment organization that cares for the whole community of life.”

A herpetologist by training and one of the first Ph.D.s to work in an American zoo, Rabb relentlessly pushed zoos toward that conservation mission by helping to establish cooperation in species management, for instance. He was also a leader in the movement toward more naturalistic animal habitats such as Tropic World, the massive enclosure at Brookfield that depicts three continents under one roof.

“He brought a lot of caring into the zoos,” Mendelson said. “He really made sure zoos were stepping up to do the absolute best in terms of animal welfare.”

In the early 1990s, Rabb developed a widely influential chart titled “Evolution of Zoos and Aquariums.” It depicts them rising from a “Menagerie” and “Living Natural History Cabinet” in the 19th Century to “Zoological Park” and “Living Museum” in the 20th to “Conservation Center” and “Environmental Resource Center” in the 21st, marked by “Immersion exhibits.”

These, along with a focus on raising awareness about the global amphibian crisis, were goals Rabb continued to pursue even after he retired as the zoo’s director in 2004 to become president emeritus.

“George was a consummate scientist and a brilliant man,” said his successor, Stuart Strahl, president and CEO of the Chicago Zoological Society, which manages the zoo. “A lot of the things that he started here were the first in the field: the first zoo nutrition lab for animals, the first behavioral endocrinology testing for stress levels in animals, good and bad, the first family play zoo anywhere ever.”

Rabb was not a charismatic figure, however, like Lester Fisher, the longtime head of Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago. “He wasn’t necessarily the guy who was out looking for votes on Mr. Popularity,” Strahl said. “He was a guy who was very serious about outcomes.”

Said Mendelson, “He made sure that the zoo was a great popularizer of information and caring, but he wasn’t a spokesperson,” adding that “painfully shy” was a fair description.

Mendelson told of one “raucous” open-mic meeting, at the Global Amphibian Conservation Summit in Washington, D.C. in 2005. As the conversation grew divisive, even “mean,” over one issue, “George leaned into my ear and said, ‘Joe, you’re not going to let this continue, are you?’,” Mendelson recalled -- a clearly understood prompt for his friend to “step up to the microphone, lay down the gauntlet, and break the impasse.”

“He has always avoided the limelight but is known as a warm and wise animal

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expert,” said a Tribune Q&A with Rabb in 1996. “He recently retired from the chairmanship of the Species Survival Commission of the IUCN-World Conservation Union, the leading scientific group that monitors the status of wildlife and advises world governments. Rabb’s work added luster to an international reputation, yet he largely remains anonymous in his hometown.”

Yet Rabb’s passion came through in that Tribune interview. “That is the most tragic part, the loss of biodiversity,” he said. “We’re bloody ignorant. The notion that we’re sort of stirring ourselves to have expeditions to Mars when we really don’t know what’s on this planet to sustain us. The yew was a trash tree until we discovered its potency in fighting breast and uterine cancer.”

Earning an undergraduate degree from the College of Charleston in his home city of Charleston, S.C., Rabb went on to earn his doctorate at the University of Michigan with a thesis on “the systematics and biogeography of lizards” in the Bahamian Islands, where he had done research in 1953, according to an extensive biography of Rabb published in 2015 in *Copeia*, a journal of the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists. Rabb joined the zoo in 1956, became director in 1976, and helped guide the institution, on Cook County Forest Preserve District Land in west suburban Brookfield, out of tough times.

“The zoo struggled with deficits and a declining physical plant through much of the 1960s,” says the Encyclopedia of Chicago. “Then, helped by a large bond issue from the Forest Preserve District, close attention to zoo governance and visitor services, and Rabb’s appointment as director in 1976, the zoo began to recreate itself as one of the nation’s best, especially in its institutional commitment to international conservation and environmental awareness.”

Rabb in 1953 married Mary Sughrue Rabb, a fellow Charlestonian and College of Charleston graduate who would run the zoo’s library and work with him on conservation issues, including among amphibians and wolves. Scientists named a species of frog discovered in 2005 after the Rabbs, the zoo said. The couple did not have children, and Mrs. Rabb died in 2006.

After his 2004 retirement, he moved off of zoo grounds to another house in Brookfield, became president emeritus and stayed active in animal issues and nonprofit governance in the Chicago area. In his career he won many of the top honors available to zoo professionals, including the 1997 Silver Medal of the Zoological Society of London and the 2008 Lifetime Achievement Award of the National Conference on Science, Policy and the Environment. At Brookfield his work led to the establishment of the zoo’s Center for the

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Science of Animal Care and Welfare and Center for Conservation Leadership.

“The collective whole of the people he affected and who worked with him and learned from him and went on to be zoo directors or amphibian biologist or educators, the collective whole is probably more than the sum of George,” Strahl said. “But individually there can never be another George Rabb.”

Even toward the end of his life he was working. Right before his surgery, Rabb met with staff of the Center for Humans and Nature, Hecht said.

“As we got ourselves settled on the patio,” she recalled, “George pulled a folder from his wheelchair” that included a review of a book called “Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Our Worst.”

“I’ve got reading material for you!” Rabb said.

Plans for a memorial service were pending.

*Note: This more detailed story replaces a shorter obituary that was first published Thursday night.*

*sajohnson@chicagotribune.com*

*Twitter @StevenKJohnson*