



NATURAL RESOURCES DEFENSE COUNCIL

EXPERT BLOG › JOEL REYNOLDS

Remembering Roger Payne, Maestro of the Seas

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Celebrated whale researcher, bio-acoustician, and conservation activist combined love of science, music, and the oceans in life-long battle to save the planet.



Dr. Roger Payne with NRDC's Reynolds, Vachon Island (October 2018)

Credit: Joel Reynolds

The world has lost one of the greatest minds in ocean protection ever to inhabit the field. Last month, whale scientist and conservationist Dr. Roger Payne died at his home in South Woodstock, Vermont at the age of 88.

Much has been, and will continue to be, written and recorded about Roger and his singular contributions to whale science and policy over more than five decades. He is to whales and the oceans what Carl Sagan was to the cosmos. He transformed the scientific landscape, made it accessible to non-scientists and the general public, and successfully navigated the treacherous waters of science and

the science-based environmental advocacy that, to his final days, were his passion and the focus of his scientific work.

Roger loved science, and he loved music. In a remarkable synergy between the two, he documented and disseminated the "Songs of the Humpback Whale," which gave voice and substance not only to the global "Save the Whales" movement but to his belief in inter-species harmony as a fundamental imperative for the survival of us all. And it is this belief that was the focus of his final essay, published by [TIME](#) just two weeks before his death.

His professional activities and achievements were innumerable. Beyond his landmark work on whale song, he correctly theorized over 50 years ago that whales have evolved to communicate across entire ocean basins, a hypothesis that formed the basis for some of the most important work in the field of ocean noise. Beginning in the 1970s, he established and for decades oversaw an extended research program studying right whales at Peninsula Valdes in Patagonian Argentina. In 1995, he published an eloquent scientific memoir called "Among Whales" that has inspired a generation of whale biologists. He received countless awards, authored hundreds of articles, gave myriad interviews, and, in 1996, produced and directed the IMAX film "Whales."

In 1971 he founded and for decades led the research organization Ocean Alliance, which, among its numerous projects, biopsied sperm whales (and other cetaceans) around the world to determine their toxic loads. Beginning in 2020 through the end of his life, he was Principal Advisor to the [Cetacean Translation Initiative](#), a novel scientific effort to decipher the sounds of sperm whales. Recent descriptions of his personal and professional history can be found in the [New York Times](#), the [Washington Post](#), [The Guardian](#), and on numerous other websites.

For over 25 years my family and I had the great good fortune to know Roger Payne personally, based not only on his work with the Natural Resources Defense Council ("NRDC") but on a fortuitous coincidence of family geography.

I first met Roger in 1997 as part of a two-day scientific research cruise off the southern California coast sponsored by the United States Navy, focusing on the impacts of its experimental high intensity low frequency active sonar ("LFA") on large whales. Over breakfast on board the Cory Chouest, a special purpose vessel outfitted by the Navy for deployment of the LFA system, we discovered that his home in South Woodstock, Vermont was located just a stone's throw from our

small summer house in East Barnard, and without hesitation he suggested we get together with his wife—world-renowned actress Lisa Harrow—and my young family of five. The following winter, and for many summers thereafter, we did just that, and over the years they sometimes stayed with us at our home in Venice Beach, California during occasional travels to or through Los Angeles.

Almost immediately I recruited Roger to become NRDC's lead scientific expert in a major international campaign against Mitsubishi Corporation's proposed construction of the world's largest industrial saltworks at Baja California's Laguna San Ignacio—a UNESCO World Heritage Site, a biosphere reserve, a whale sanctuary, a migratory bird sanctuary, and the last place on Earth where gray whales breed and calve undisturbed by human intrusion.



Dr. Roger Payne at Laguna San Ignacio, Baja California (January 1998)

Credit: Joel Reynolds

One afternoon, while driving around South Woodstock in his pickup truck, we discussed ways to elevate the role of science in a growing campaign that, until then, had been focused on international law, communications, and activism in Mexico, supported by NRDC members. He agreed to draft a brief scientific statement about the risk posed by the Mitsubishi project to gray whales, to be circulated for possible endorsement by some of the world's best recognized scientists, starting with his friend and colleague Dr. Murray Gell-Mann, 1969 Nobel Laureate in Physics. I suggested inviting NRDC Trustee and renowned

Enabled by their exceptional contacts in the world of science, the 500-word statement was successfully circulated for review over a period of months and endorsed by a stellar group of 34 international luminaries from the world of science, including, in addition to Roger Payne, Sylvia Earle, and Murray Gell-Mann, names like Anderson, Baltimore, Dawkins, Diamond, Ehrlich, Eisner, Gomez Pompa, Gould, Guillemin, Holt, Huxley, Josephson, Klug, Meadows, Molina, Raven, Watson, Wilson, and many others—with nine Nobel Laureates among them.



"We believe that the industrialization of this undisturbed breeding habitat is contrary to the principles and values that sanctuaries, biosphere reserves, and World Heritage Sites were created to uphold. To build major industry here . . . will

create a dangerous precedent—a precedent at odds with the broad scientific consensus that life in the world’s estuaries and coastal waters is increasingly threatened by loss and degradation of habitat through physical alteration of ecosystems and by pollution.

“More specifically, building the saltworks at Laguna San Ignacio will risk introducing to the area the top three present threats to whales besides whaling: loss of habitat, accidents involving collisions with ships, and the slow but inexorable bioaccumulation of contaminants in the whales’ bodies.

“[W]e believe that ESSA’s proposed saltworks would pose an unacceptable risk to significant biological resources in and around Laguna San Ignacio. We respectfully urge Mitsubishi to abandon the project and trust that the Mexican government will stand by its original decision denying . . . permission to construct a saltworks at Laguna San Ignacio.”

With funding from NRDC’s lead United States-based campaign partner the International Fund for Animal Welfare (“IFAW”), the statement—under the heading “An unacceptable risk”—was published as a [full-page ad](#) in leading newspapers around the world, including the International Herald Tribune, the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and Mexico City’s La Reforma. This high profile, pre-emptive scientific condemnation by some of the most highly decorated scientists in the world was a strategy that Mitsubishi never saw coming and never effectively refuted.

Roger became the campaign’s scientific spokesperson, appearing in a range of media and other settings, including during a January 1998 five-day media trip to the lagoon sponsored by NRDC and IFAW to host a delegation of business leaders and environmentalists from Japan. In 1999 he appeared at a Santa Monica press conference with actor and marine mammal advocate Pierce Brosnan to announce an economic boycott of Mitsubishi and its products, including cars, electronics, cameras, and even its California-based bank.

On March 3, 2000, as these and a range of other strategies gained traction, and just days after visiting the lagoon with his family, Mexico’s President Ernesto Zedillo called a press conference in Mexico City to announce the “[definitive termination](#)” of the salt works project, citing the need to protect Laguna San Ignacio and its surrounding landscape as an invaluable part of the natural heritage of Mexico and its people.



Dr. Roger Payne at Laguna San Ignacio, Baja California (January 1998)
Credit: Joel Reynolds



Dr. Roger Payne with Japanese delegation, actor and activist Lauren Hutton, and NRDC's Reynolds (January 1998)

This successful international campaign was the foundation of ongoing consultation and occasional collaboration with Roger over the years on a range of environmental issues, from ocean noise to toxics to climate change and more. In August 2002, for example, NRDC was criticized by NOAA's Office of Protected Resources after actor Cameron Diaz devoted much of her segment on David Letterman's late night TV talk show to an enthusiastic description of kissing baby gray whales at Laguna San Ignacio during a trip with NRDC. In a detailed response, NRDC prominently cited Roger's expert opinion that such interactions were "among the most positive experiences with whales" he had seen in decades of research and, further, that not only did he not consider the interaction harmful to the whales, but he considered it "essential to the ultimate survival of the gray whale species." NOAA dropped its inquiry.

He was a beautiful writer, a compelling speaker, and a brilliant advocate for marine life who understood the world through the lens of science. But that understanding was tempered by his sense of the demonstrated potential of science for misuse and his concern that, in the wake of a climate-induced decline of the human race followed by another 500 million years of evolution, science would once again be invented, only to "destroy the world again."

In May 2018, for example, he wrote in an email:

"As I see it, it is the fatal flaw of evolution that always selects for the bigger-than, meaner-than, nastier-than species. And that species is likely to be the one most similar to the loser it defeats. The loser was smaller or nicer or pleasanter, but it was the species with which the winner was most competitive.

"There are exceptions; let us not forget that Neanderthals lasted between two and 4 times as long as we *Homo sapiens* have been here.... Their greater longevity also means that in order just to equal the residence time of Neanderthals on this planet we will have to survive for something like another 300,000 years. And what do you think are the chances that we can do that? I think they are zero.... The only positive part of my prediction is that the fervor with which I hope I am wrong is greater than yours or anyone else's. In my case the road to happiness is paved with one's own misjudgments."

His emails were full of big ideas, exuberance, and self-deprecating humor—lines like this one from a February 2021 email: "Ah ignorance, you and I are on such

familiar terms; I've known you even longer than I've known Joel, and he and I go waaaaay back."

He had an irrepressible sense of humor, a warm smile and easy laugh, and a passionate devotion to his wife and children. In the living room of their South Woodstock home, he and Lisa had a full-size swing—an unusual piece of house furniture that made a lasting impression on my young children. He was endlessly generous not only with his time and expertise, but if given the slightest opportunity, he would happily load his chainsaw into the back of his pick-up and head over to help carve up our fallen birch trees in the wake of a Vermont storm.

Roger loved music and enjoyed both playing his cello and singing. Once, on a return flight from Laguna San Ignacio, we spent almost two hours sight-singing through a book of three to eight-part canons about the birth and first years of my son Sam. His effusive appreciation for this musical diary was exceeded only by my own!

With Lisa, he co-wrote and over a decade widely presented a two-person performance piece on the environment, called "[Sea Change: Reversing the Tide](#)." Through their extraordinary voices, it combined a knowledge of science with the wisdom of poetry in a dramatic plea for environmental sanity. Like his final essay in [TIME](#), it was an expression of hope for humanity in the face of dire warnings from scientists about our collision course with climate catastrophe.

Whale Biologist Roger Payne & Actress Lisa Harrow Perform SeaChange: Reversing the Tide at the Whaling Museum on August 30

August 21, 2017



Nantucket Historical Association Press Release (August 2017)

I never tired of hearing Roger's thoughts on the state of the world. One of our most memorable conversations was in October 2018 when I joined him and his son John and daughter-in-law Annie (both Ph.D scientists) for lunch in the sunny garden of their home on Vachon Island, near Seattle. We talked for three hours, mostly about whether optimism can be reconciled with the checkered past of the human race and what science is now telling us about where we're headed. Although there was some disagreement on the answer, I remember that afternoon as a moment of great joy and, to me, an unforgettable gift.

Whatever doubts he may have had about our long-term future, Roger never wavered in his conviction that there is unique opportunity in this moment of unprecedented environmental challenge. In fact, perhaps his most frequently cited quotation—by me and many others—was precisely to this point. "The environmental crises we face," he said, "provide us with the most singular opportunity for greatness ever presented to any generation in any civilization." And it is this call to action that I will always remember as the foundation and heart of what Roger believed, how he lived, and the activism that he hoped to inspire in others.

Roger Payne was a rare combination of brilliance, relentless environmental commitment, and boundless curiosity about, and compassion for, all living things. To the end, he was a mentor to any of us who care deeply about the fate of the Earth, its wildlife, and its people. In a final hour-long conversation with him three weeks before he died, he was very much as I had always known him—lively, laughing, warm, interested in the world, and engaged—although gravely ill and already in hospice.

For 25 years, through thick and thin, Roger was a rare and wonderful friend. For his transformational work over decades in defense of the oceans and our endangered whales, NRDC and its three million members and activists—all of us—are profoundly in his debt. We will never forget him.



Whale spy-hopping at San Ignacio Lagoon (March 1997)
Credit: Robert Glenn Ketchum