

This year's laureate – an environmental pioneer

The 2001 Volvo Environment Prize has been presented to Professor George M Woodwell from Massachusetts in the USA. A prominent scientist, well ahead of his time, who has had to fight to defend his beliefs.

He was one of the first people to come to the conclusion that the greatest threat to the global environment was actually posed by human beings. A theory that was initially received with criticism and scepticism, but which now forms the basis of ecological research the world over.

George M Woodwell has been working on and promoting interest in ecological issues for more than 40 years. Back at the beginning of the 1960s, he pointed out that there was a risk that the world's ecological systems would be harmed by man's exploitation of natural resources.

With his research, George M Woodwell demonstrated that all life on earth created a unit, a chain in which every link is important. He pointed



Photo: Johan Olander

out that radioactivity, chemical pesticides and insecticides and deforestation disrupt the vital interplay between flora and fauna and pose a threat to life on earth.

However, his theories were well ahead of their time and it took many years for George M Woodwell to be accepted as a serious researcher. His methods are now acclaimed and acknowledged throughout the world and his work is described as pioneering and outstanding.

George M Woodwell is a doctor of botany from Duke University in the USA. He has received a great many awards, including the Heinz Environment Award in 1996, when he was described as "one of the world's most respected champions of the environment". What is more, he has taken the initiative and set up a number of research institutes in the USA.

George M Woodwell has also continued stubbornly to present his theories to politicians, the authorities and the general public.

This is the twelfth time Volvo is presenting its Environment Prize. It was instituted in 1990 to support environmental research and is worth SEK 1.5 million. ●

“It’s our duty as scientists to make government work”

The winner of this year’s Volvo Environment Prize, George M Woodwell, has shown that man is a threat to the ecological system of which he himself is a part.

He is a modest man, but under the surface he displays unshakable integrity.

“It’s our duty as scientists to make government work. To make the politicians do their job and put the public’s interest in the foreground,” he says.

Woods Hole is a small town on the Atlantic coast. It is situated in the southwestern corner of Cape Cod, the classical US holiday island which houses the Kennedys’ “summer cottage”, among other things.

The small street, which doubles as the shopping centre, has a small number of restaurants and a few souvenir shops, as well as a general store. Perhaps the most striking feature is all the laboratories and institutes. Woods Hole is something of a world centre for marine biology and the number of professors per capita in this small fishing town is unusually high.

As you enter Woods Hole, you pass a red brick building which is the home of the Woods Hole Research Center and the winner of the 2001 Volvo Environment Prize, George M Woodwell. In normal cir-

cumstances, he rents an office on the ground floor of the parish hall round the corner, but he is currently holding a phone conference in a room in the red brick building.

After waiting for a few minutes, we meet outside the conference room, he shows me the way to the kitchen when the coffee maker is half full of cold coffee and apologises for not being able to offer me coffee right away. We sit down at a rustic kitchen table and start talking. He is a powerful man with grey hair and an honest, straightforward attitude. It is difficult to define his age, he could be anything from 45 to 70, he has a firm handshake and he looks you straight in the eye when he talks.

“I’m a New Englander, I grew up on a farm in Maine and maybe that’s where I got my interest in biology from. I had some good professors in Dartmouth, where I went to college, and they broadened my perspective to ecology. I graduated with the class of ’50. After that, I spent three years on oceanographic ships in the navy and one year on a cruiser... that last year wasn’t in my taste, but the years on the oceanographic ships were good.”

After completing his military service, Woodwell continued his studies and obtained a doctorate in botany from Duke University. Since then, he has been presented with other honorary titles from other institutes. When asked who he is, he answers, “A New Englander”. When asked what his greatest achievement is, he

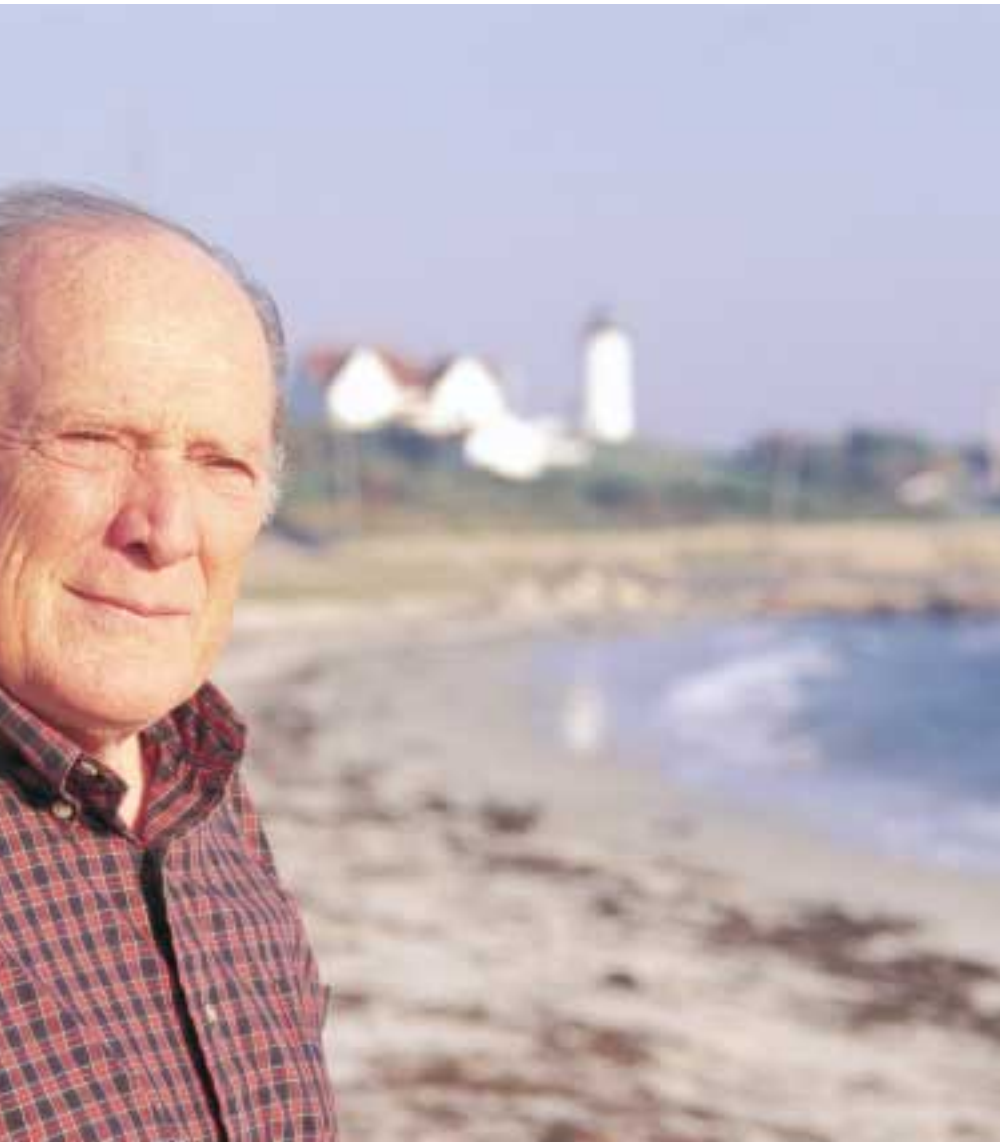


Photo: Johan Olander

says, “I just don’t think like that”.

He is a modest, level-headed person, but under the surface one senses unshakable integrity. He is known as a true environmental champion who has used slow and meticulous scientific methods to demonstrate that man is a threat to the ecological system of which he himself is a part. His pioneering studies of the effect of DDT and other pesticides on the natural eco cycle opened the eyes of the world to the dangers in the 1960s. As he describes it, it was a question of research rather than an emotional battle.

“It was apparent after the studies we did that the toxins stayed in the system and created major problems at the top of the food chain. At the time, it was considered a radical viewpoint not a scientific fact. We had to fight the polluters and the



George M Woodwell has been presented with this year's Environment Prize for his pioneering research. He lives and works in Woods Hole in Cape Cod.

politicians in court and that brought the issue into the press and, when we eventually won, it was widely publicised.”

This is an example of what the world has come to regard as Woodwell's greatest achievement. Using sound scientific methods, he has shown that we can actually destroy our own eco system and thereby threaten not only the flora and fauna but also the human race. He was one of the first to start describing the earth as an eco system in which every part is equally important.

“It's our duty as scientists to make government work. To make the politicians do their job and put the public's interest in the foreground. Scientists have a big role to play. We're the third leg that the government sits on. Economics, politics and then sciences. We should be more power-

ful and politicians should not participate in destruction. When we uncover facts that tell us that a certain activity is destroying an eco system, we cannot allow ourselves to be silenced by economic interests or politics.”

When Woodwell goes on to give some examples of companies and political situations in which he has seen scientific facts twisted to become half-truths and total lies, you catch a glimpse of the activist he readily admits to being.

He has three pieces of advice for the future. To begin with, we have to stabilise the atmosphere – if nothing else, to protect the general public from an environment that could soon become harmful for both human beings and nature.

“We can't move fast enough on this issue.”

His second piece of advice is as follows. “We should implement a world view that sees earth as a living system where there is no room for any activities that don't preserve the bionic living system.”

Finally, “We have to acknowledge the finite limits of earth”.

There is a weight behind his words that makes you take him seriously. He is not a prophet of doom, he is instead a simple scientist who has seen proof of what we can do to the earth with his own eyes and has taken the consequences.

He is proud and grateful to have won the Volvo Environment Prize, which he regards as encouragement, a sign that he has made the right choice in his life and career.

“I'm delighted at the opportunity that the prize means to me, a good portion of it will go straight into supporting the institution (Woods Hole Research Center). Funds all come from some form of financial success and it's good that it's being distributed to causes that are important.”

As we are about to part, he suddenly stops me and says, “I just remembered what my most important achievement was... marrying Katherine, my wife!”

He laughs loudly and waves his huge hand.

A farmer's son who has stayed close to nature. ●

Johan Olander

Seminar with local perspective

The 2001 Volvo Environment Prize laureate will receive the tokens of his award at a ceremony at the Concert Hall in Göteborg on the evening of 30 October. In the afternoon, Dr Woodwell will be presented to a wider audience and speak at the seminar about success factors for projects that improve the environment in our region. We have invited representatives from the City of Göteborg, academia and industry to a discussion.

Carbon dioxide emissions must and can be reduced. There are successful projects in Göteborg that can inspire other cities and regions to produce even better results.

The examples that will be discussed at the seminar relate to district heating, methane as fuel for transport and a vision for future mobility in the city.

● District heating

Mr. Thore Sahlin, from Göteborg Energi AB, will describe how the city and its industry have combined forces to use existing energy sources in the area to reduce the need for oil and coal for heating purposes to a minimum, thereby also dramatically reducing all the emissions including CO₂.

● Methane gas for road transport

Mr. Stephen Wallman, from Volvo Cars, will present the history of the introduction of methane gas as a fuel for cars, buses and trucks. The gas distribution system was developed for both the imported natural gas and the locally produced biogas. The vehicles were introduced in larger series as the number of filling stations increased.

● The Lundby vision for mobility management

Ms. Lisa Sundell will present projects in which the new and rapidly-expanding area of Lundby is being used as a test bed for the future full-scale introduction of sustainable transport solutions in Göteborg. Examples include river shuttle boats, alternatively fuelled vehicles, car pooling and advanced systems for public transport and goods distribution.

The panel consisting of **Dr George M Woodwell**, the Woods Hole Research Center, Mass, USA, **Mr Claes Roxbergh**, Deputy Mayor, City of Göteborg, **Professor Christian Azar**, Department of Physical Resource Theory, Chalmers University of Technology, **Professor Kent Asp**, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Göteborg University, **Mr Thore Sahlin**, Senior Vice President, Göteborg Energi AB, **Mr Stephen Wallman**, Director, Mobility and Technology Assessment, Volvo Car Corporation, will discuss how different stakeholders in society contribute to make a development project successful.

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