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## Herb Kariel: Living as Though All Life Matters

By Joyce Hildebrand

Herb Kariel has more than enough time to reflect on his jam-packed life as a professor, mountain climber, and world traveller. "I've had a good life," he muses from his two-room unit in a Calgary retirement residence. Our conversation meanders widely, but it always returns to his core passion: living responsibly on the earth as one species among many.

The seeds for Herb's love of wilderness were sown during childhood along the banks of the Elbe River in his native Germany. "Our schoolteacher took us on hikes and told us about some of the history and land use," he says, recalling how his early schooling linked the natural and human environments. On weekends, this formal education was complemented with *Spaziergänge* ("nature walks") led by his father, who owned a small chain of department stores.

In the mid-1930s, with the family living in Dresden, friends in the Nazi party warned Herb's father of imminent increasing anti-Semitism. They urged him to leave. In 1938, when Herb was 11, the family – minus Herb's brother, who had preceded them – boarded a ship to the U.S. They heard about the nation-wide assault against Jews, later called Kristallnacht, while crossing the Atlantic.

The family settled in Portland, Oregon, where Herb's deep connection with the Pacific Northwest took root. After graduating from the University of Oregon with a degree in economics, he moved to San Francisco, where he worked as a grocery clerk. A common love of the outdoors brought Herb and his wife, Pat, together: they met on Sierra Club outings, and their attraction to wilderness grew into a desire to protect it. But Herb's love for the Cascadian landscape soon led them back to Oregon, where he obtained a teacher's certificate.

Several years of elementary school teaching, including a year in New Zealand with Pat and their two children, and Herb was ready for new challenges. After two more degrees – a Master of Education and a PhD in geography – he began his career as a geography professor at Western Washington State University in Bellingham.

A few years later, while teaching at California State University in Hayward, a coincidence brought Herb to Canada. As was his custom, he took a group of students to the geography department tea at Berkeley, where he met a visitor to the university: the man whose house he and his family had stayed in during a summer teaching stint in Calgary more than a decade earlier. The meeting led to an offer of a teaching position at the University of Calgary. In 1967 Herb accepted on a trial basis, immersed himself with vigour into the life of the city and its surroundings, and never left.

Herb's environmental awareness took a leap forward with a grade eight project on Columbia River dams. He realized that the army engineers behind these projects didn't tell the whole story, leaving out certain impacts on the natural environment. "I became more and more interested in environmental matters," he says, remembering the years in California immediately after high school. After returning to Oregon, he and Pat joined the North Cascades Conservation Council and the Olympic Parks Association. They also helped found the Pacific Northwest Chapter of the Sierra Club, and after moving to Canada, the Prairie Chapter. Now divorced, they remain friends, aware that many of their accomplishments were achieved together.

Keen to deflect the spotlight, Herb credits his family, friends, and colleagues for much of what he has done. His activism and lifestyle grew from his community and his experience of nature. A lifetime member of the Alpine Club of Canada, where he has advocated for greater environmental concern rather than simply access to wild places, he was recognized by the Club with the Silver Rope for mountaineering leadership (1980) and the Distinguished Service Award (1988).





Although Herb's research has taken him far afield, his environmentalism has focussed on the places where he has lived and worked. In Calgary, he participated in the Urban Parks Master Plan and was the University's representative on the River Valleys Committee. He also contributed to the Energy and Utility Board's noise emission guidelines for oil and gas facilities. In his university teaching, he incorporated environmental ethics whenever he could. "I don't think nature is here only to use," he says. "We are part of nature, not apart from it. We have to make sure we use it wisely." Many of his students went on to apply what they had learned in land-use planning in national and provincial parks.

Herb's long participation with the Alberta Wilderness Association began on AWA hikes. Despite thinking the group was "too tame," his involvement gradually increased. A valued Director on the AWA Board for many years, he proposed Board retreats that included brainstorming sessions, now a regular occurrence. He has been instrumental in increasing the journalistic professionalism of the *Wild Lands Advocate*, and he continues to push the organization toward greater vision and efficacy. "I think AWA has evolved," he says, "but we could take a stronger stand on issues."

Never afraid to speak his mind, Herb has lectured widely and appeared at numerous hearings. "I often said, now this has gone too far," he recalls. "People have to speak out. The government is for the people, we're not here for the government, which is what they often think." Mark Lowey, managing editor and publisher of *EnviroLine*, attended some of Herb's classes and confirms his outspokenness: "He's never shy of voicing his opinion. As an academic, he took flak for his public positions."

Herb's interests have been as panoramic as the mountaintop views he pursued with such diligence, going far beyond his academic specialization in the impact of noise in recreational environments. Other research topics included social and economic impacts of tourism, the media, mountain huts, and protected areas. Since retiring, his characteristic curiosity has led him to take courses in music appreciation, art history, and plant taxonomy.

Although his energy is not what it once was, it takes no more than a breeze to fan the flames: "We have to change our whole attitude about the environment. People have to speak out." He worries about no longer being able to do that. "My father taught me to try to make a contribution, and I can't do that anymore." When reminded of the many positive changes he has effected, he murmurs with customary self-effacement, "In my little way, I suppose."

Herb's unfinished memoirs, *Travels with Herbie*, may forever remain unpublished, but in his "little way," he has probably far exceeded his father's expectations. He stresses that his contributions, for which he will receive an AWA Alberta Wilderness Defenders Award in the fall, have been a natural outcome of living an environmental ethic. "That's what permeates everything," he says. "It's about living as though we are part of the environment, not separate from it."

*With contributions by Andy Marshall.*

