

In November AWA was privileged to bestow Wilderness Defender Awards to Gus Yaki and Tom Maccagno. Vivian Pharis and Brittany Verbeek prepared the following tributes to these magnificent friends.

# Tom Maccagno: Champion of the Wild

By Vivian Pharis, AWA Board of Directors

“In this province, everything has a for-sale sign on it. But wilderness is like a cathedral. You don’t look for it to have another purpose.”

Tom Maccagno

*Wild Lands Advocate* editor Ian Urquhart gave Tom Maccagno the moniker “Champion of the Wild” when Tom’s eulogies were posted in the February 2012 issue of the *Wild Lands Advocate*. Anyone who knew Tom would recognize how applicable it really is. AWA regrets missing the opportunity to interview Tom in person about his remarkable life in Alberta’s north and bestow him in person with a Wilderness Defender’s award. Posthumously, Tom joined other notable wilderness enthusiasts and conservationists as a Wilderness Defender at AWA’s 2014 awards ceremony.

Thomas Maccagno was born and lived his entire life between Alberta’s 53rd and 55th parallels, although his parents had immigrated to Lac La Biche from faraway France and Italy. From early on, Tom’s intellect was evident and he was the first Lac La Biche citizen to gain a law degree. Although Tom practiced law all his professional life, both in Edmonton and later back home in Lac La Biche, his heart



Tom Maccagno

pulled him in other directions, but particularly towards the bush and all things wild and natural. At heart he was a scientist, a historian, and an adventurer.

A voracious reader and irrepressible student, Tom needed only a slight trigger of interest to send him down the road to proficiency in some new area. On one occasion that trigger was his discovery of a tiny, exquisite orchid in an area of local bush. Soon Tom knew as much about Alberta orchids, rare and common, as any trained botanist, and he became known for his orchid quest and defending their habitat.

But, being a lawyer helped to hone Tom’s sharp mind, to keep it focused, and gave him oratorical powers that stood him in good stead, especially when he argued in support of land, water or wildlife protection. He could be a formidable opponent to those wanting to log, build roads or

wellsites, befoul the waters or otherwise inflict damage to landscapes like those around Lakeland, Lac La Biche’s shores, sensitive bogs and fens or sites of historical interest. Woe could befall an unsuspecting industry representative or civil servant who was unprepared for a meeting or sloppy with his facts. When a defenseless human, orchid, lake, fish or pond needed his help, Tom could unleash such a torrent of rhetorical and scientific skill as to close further debate. Otherwise, Tom was as gentle, quiet, and unassuming as a *Habenaria obtusata*; he was a remarkable observer of and teacher about nature, a loving husband and father, and a wise and caring friend.

Tom’s wife Annette, feels Tom’s appetite for reading, learning, and acutely observing, promoted his analytical thinking and led to his concern some 30 years ago, about where the unbridled development of the Athabasca tar sands could take the local area and how it could affect not only Canada, but beyond. He had favourite haunts and would return to them year after year, sometimes noting alarming changes. Climate change also concerned him that far back when almost no one else in Alberta had even heard the term. His son Morris, referred to his Dad as a “lonely pioneer”- someone ahead of his time in seeing the need for conservation and protection in the face of a changing climate and the expanding human footprint. But, he could count as friends, such notable professors as David Schindler and Doug Hutton, with whom he undoubtedly, fruitfully, discussed his various concerns.

Following retirement from his law career, Tom devoted greater efforts to conservation but he was now also able to delve deeper into another long time interest, that of the local history of the Lac La Biche area. Enthused by the rich stories of the brave and independent men of the fur trade, Tom soaked up their adventures and retold their tales from the perspective of an admirer. He authored various articles in a number of journals such as *The Beaver*, about Lac La Biche and its early mission, and, of course, about the fur trade that spawned the line of forts down the Athabasca-Mackenzie River system, like McMurray, Chipewyan and Simpson.

Tom served Lac La Biche as its mayor for several terms in the 1990s. But, undoubtedly he will be remembered most for his tireless work on behalf of a host of associations and environmental groups. A lifelong supporter of preserving the nature and beauty of the Lac La Biche and Lakeland area, he was also instrumental in gaining formal protection for the Garner fen, an area of uncommon boreal orchids. A contributor to the Alberta Parks book *Orchids of Lakeland*, he also reported on other rare plants in the region. The islands in Lac La Biche were protected within Sir Winston Churchill Provincial Park through his ef-

forts. Now, fittingly, one of those islands is to be named in Tom's honour. Other awards in his name include an Alberta Achievement Award for Preservation and Conservation, an Emerald Award, Canada's Recreational Fisheries Award, Queen Elizabeth II Golden Jubilee Medal, and Canadian Environmental Conservation Gold Award. No doubt he was especially pleased to have been made an Honourary Elder of the Beaver Lake Cree Nation.

Now Tom will be further recognized as an Alberta Wilderness Defender – another appropriate tribute for this extraordinary Albertan. 🌲