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Marine conservation biologist honored by Alaska Legislature

Veteran marine conservation biologist Rick Steiner is being recognized by the 27th Alaska Legislature for his outstanding public service to the University of Alaska, and the impact of his work internationally.

The legislative citation, authored by Rep. Berta Gardner, D-Anchorage, and signed by 30 Republicans and Democrats in the State House, cites Steiner's nearly 30 year career with the university as well as his global conservation work, and publications that have reached millions of readers.

The citation is to be presented to Steiner on Earth Day, this Friday, during the Alaska Center for the Environment auction at the Anchorage Museum of History and Art.

"It honestly came as a complete surprise to me, and I am truly humbled by it," Steiner said. "It shows that the Alaska Legislature perhaps appreciates the necessity of environmental perspective in developing policy."

"Professor Steiner's work toward a constructive resolution of the Exxon Valdez oil spill is legendary," the citation notes. "In the wake of the spill, Rick Steiner was a leading voice for independent scientific analysis to determine damages and recovery strategies. He was also a strong proponent of public structures and processes to prevent future spills.

"More recently, he has been a key advisor on developing strategies to assess impacts and remedies to address the Deep Water Horizon disaster."

In recent years Steiner has also lent his expertise to advocating against offshore oil development in Bristol Bay, and advocating for academic free speech on marine conservation issues. While many see Steiner as a hero for his work in the wake of the Exxon Valdez oil spill, he has also been criticized for his own criticism of state and federal agencies, the governor and his supervisors at the Alaska Sea Grant program, which paid a portion of his salary.

The United Kingdom's well-respected Guardian newspaper notwithstanding has described Steiner as "one of the world's leading marine conservation scientists," as well as "one of the most respected and outspoken academics on the oil industry's environmental record."

The citation also cites a number of Steiner's global conservation efforts in high-risk conflict zones around the world. These include working in the Colombian Amazon with a team of heavily armed guards, to assist indigenous tribes with biodiversity conservation; working on behalf of the government of Pakistan at a very dangerous time, to establish and lead the first natural resource damage assessment program in a development country; assisting Nigeria's ministry of environment in developing a program to mitigate 50 years of oil damages; and organizing an environmental damage assessment for the government of Lebanon after the massive eastern Mediterranean oil spill.

In summary, legislators saluted Steiner for "his many and significant contributions to independent scientific inquiry and for his strong commitment to promoting sound public policy decisions in Alaska and around the world."

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