

INTERVIEW WITH DR. GEORGE SCHALLER
BY ROGER KAYE DECEMBER 11, 2002

MR. KAYE: This an Oral History interview with Dr. George Schaller conducted on December 11, 2002 by Roger Kaye in Fairbanks. Dr. Schaller we'll begin in the present. Can you tell me a little bit about your position with the Wildlife Conservation Society, what you do, and particularly why you do what you do?

DR. SCHALLER: I started actually with Wildlife Conservation Society, known at the time was the New York Zoological Society with the 1956 Murie Expedition to the Sheenjek River. That was my first contact with them. I had heard that Olaus and Mardy were going to go up into the Brooks Range and I wrote Olaus saying that I was available and I'd be happy to be your assistant and to learn. I also said that I would come for free as long as I was fed. He, very generously and actually, with great warmth replied that he would like to have me along. He was sure that I would enjoy the studies and the life up there. I have been affiliated with the Wilderness Conservation Society ever since. I am a naturalist. I used to direct the International Program. Now, I am just the Vice-President. But I spend most of my time in the field doing base-line studies on various species, monitoring programs that we have, surveying areas in various countries that should possibly be some sort of protected area. That keeps one busy because the Wildlife Conservation Society has projects in about 50 countries. Most of them are run by nationals within their own country. I have my own interests. I particularly like mountains and remote areas. I spent many years in China, particularly in the Tibetan Plateau. I studied the Pandas there. I spent a number of years in Africa studying Gorillas and Lions. I have worked in Pakistan, Nepal, India, Tajikistan, Iran, Laos, Viet Nam, Brazil, and on and on. It's been a rewarding life because most countries have become aware of the need for conservation even though the current administration in the U. S. and you make considerable progress with collaborating and helping these countries.

MR. KAYE: What motivates you?

DR. SCHALLER: Well, motivation is difficult to define. Obviously one wants to do something beyond one's self to serve society in something useful, in some way. Certainly, conservation is one such task, and you're leaving something for the future. Beyond that, there is obviously the pleasure of just being outdoors in remote areas, studying unique species that nobody has ever watched before. And if you can help protect something that you have studied, that gives tremendous personal satisfaction. I chose this kind of life because I have always been interested in the outdoors, in animals, and in roaming here and there. I suspect that most naturalists have that kind of background. That's one aspect that drew me to the University of Alaska. There, you have Alaska. You have tremendous freedom and space still. I have never really wanted to do anything else.

MR. KAYE: Throughout your work, you've always combined biological research with advocacy. Some biologists are reluctant to do that. What do you think the role of a biologist should be towards the subject?

DR. SCHALLER: I presume that most people study something, not just as a job, but because you're curious. You have, or ought to have the response of heart towards what you are doing. I think this is where, for example, the Murie Expedition had a tremendous influence on me. In that Olaus particularly, did superb fieldwork. He was a well-known Mammalogist. He was also President of the Wilderness Society. So you have the combination of doing good research and at the same time, trying to conserve an area, for whatever reason. Maybe you think you like a particular species. You want to save the Caribou migration. Or, you think an area is simply beautiful. You can have a lot of reasons for preserving something. But most people as a third category also consider the spiritual values. You can phrase it in another way. You can talk about, as Olaus did, the precious intangible values. That basically means that you respond to the beauty of an area. You get a feeling of personal well-being. You're not thinking of how much money the area can make from tourism or anything else. You don't think about just the biological aspect; how many species are there? How do you quantify the howl of a Wolf, or the sight of a Grizzly for example? Or just a beautiful river scene crowded by mountains? That kind of thing you can call intangible values or spiritual values, or whatever. Olaus and Mardie both combined all of these values in a wonderful fashion. I have tried to do it also.

MR. KAYE: Would you say that your time with them there on the Sheenjek influenced your career and your later accomplishments?

DR. SCHALLER: They certainly contributed and influenced. I obviously had a predisposition to absorb this. They emphasized it, and I saw how Olaus, who was in his late 60's then, still retained his enthusiasm, his spirit of adventure and his real passion to learn more about the environment and respond to it's beauty. This was whether he talked about it or made sketches. I remember once particularly. We were out hiking together over the Muskeg Tundra and he came across a big pile of very soggy Grizzly Bear droppings. One would be tempted to ignore them. But Olaus knelt down and cupped the wet droppings in his hands. And with a great big grin, he looked at them and dissected them to see what the bear had eaten. That became just another small fact that cumulatively gave us some insights into what went on in the ecology of the area. That always has impressed me.

MR. KAYE: How about Mardy Murie? What was your impression of her?

DR. SCHALLER: Mardie was tremendously supportive and focused on Olaus. They had similar beliefs. She helped him in every way she could. She didn't come really into her own as a public person until after Olaus died. She, in effect, took over from Olaus in

speaking out loudly and clearly on behalf of the environment. She has done that so effectively since he died in 1963.

MR. KAYE: What was the range of values that you feel Olaus and Mardy wanted to protect in this area? It is my understanding that they weren't necessarily focused on a refuge with its implication of being set aside for a particular species that of most interest to us, but more of an ecological perspective. Is that your sense of where they were coming from?

DR. SCHALLER: The Brooks Range has always had, and still has very few people. It's basically still undamaged. Back in the 1930s, Forester Bob Marshall spent a year up there. They made other trips. He suggested that the whole area be protected in some way. Then in the early 1950s two National Park Service Biologists, Lowell Sumner and George Collins took a flying trip around the area. They stimulated Olaus and Mardy to go up there and take a closer look to see what kind of protection should be given to it. I don't think anybody thought of it in terms of a National Park, closed to everything other than a few tourists; but as a wilderness area that should be maintained without roads, without development just so people can go in to trek, and boat on the river; hunt and in general enjoy the out of doors.

MR. KAYE: How about William O. Douglas? He was there for a while when you were up at Sheenjek. What was your impression of him? And why did he come here, a Justice in the Supreme Court to spend time up there?

DR. SCHALLER: William O. Douglas was a world traveler when he wasn't sitting on the Court. He had a vast curiosity about the world, its people, and the environment. He took part in various environmental issues in and around Washington. This is where he came in contact with Olaus, and they invited him up there. He flew up with his wife Mercedes for a few days to look around and see what's going on.

MR. KAYE: Going back to some of Olaus' particular interests in protecting this place. It seemed that he was more focused on the perpetuation of natural processes, rather than specific species or features. That ecological process was particularly important to him. Is that your sense?

DR. SCHALLER: I don't know if he had particular interest in the process of the area. But he was most definitely interested in the 'wholeness' of it. Here was a functioning, beautiful wilderness, which had all the different habitats of the Arctic. It had spruce forests. It had tundras, mountains, and glaciers and coastal plains. It has everything. It has the full range of habitats, which is unusual and at the same time, he felt it should be simply maintained for its wilderness value. I'm not sure he thought of it as an ecological process, and so forth.

MR. KAYE: In an earlier interview, you told me about historic values that the Refuge was thought to hold. Could you say something about that? I think it was in terms of cultural history.

DR. SCHALLER: Well, the cultural history obviously, in the area is ancient. Right near camp on a knoll we found stone tools which anthropologists later said may be as much as 8,000 years old. So you had early hunters already using the area. When we were there, that had continued. In that Arctic Village was about forty-five or fifty miles to the southwest, from which Indians came to hunt Wolves and Caribou. We met one little group. And that's fine. It's maintaining an ancient cultural tradition. Certainly, if the present administration has it's way, and degrades the coastal plain and reduces the Caribou that will have an impact on the Indians both in Alaska and Canada. The Caribou move across international boundaries.

MR. KAYE: Did Olaus have quite a bit of interest in or at least empathy with the native people and those traditional uses?

DR. SCHALLER: Very much so. Olaus spent quite a number of years in Alaska working mostly with the Aleuts, Eskimos, and the Indians. They helped him a great deal. They were always very hospitable. He appreciated their traditional way of life.

MR. KAYE: You once mentioned historic values in terms of American history and the wilderness being part of our cultural history perhaps as a reason to protect it. Can you tell us little bit about that?

DR. SCHALLER: Well, I think certainly that wilderness has given America its vision and identity. We don't have any cultural monuments like so many in Europe and Asia to which people can go to, to get some contact with the past. We have our wilderness. People appreciate it for its values, the feeling of solitude it gives us. So many people feel that it ought to be saved for it's own sake. Look at the cowboy mentality so many people still have about cowboys because it was the opening up of the west. In Alaska, they keep talking about the last frontier even though they haven't had a last frontier there for a well over a hundred years. Even the anti-environmental people in this administration still retain a little bit of feeling for it. The President goes down and sits on his ranch. Vice-President Chaney has a fancy home in Jackson Hole, one of the most beautiful spots in the United States. Yet, both are willing to trash the rest of the country even though they have their little island of wilderness. This is something I can't understand.

MR. KAYE: You mentioned wilderness being saved for it's own sake. It's interesting that seems to be kind of a prominent motivation for many people who never would have supported setting it aside, which seems to be symbolic value. Would you talk a little bit more about the value of saving a place for it's own sake beyond a particular use of it?

DR. SCHALLER: I think everybody needs something beyond one's self. I think people travel all over the world these days to see some wilderness elsewhere because they get a feeling of well-being and contentment. And most certainly, few people will ever visit the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. But a lot of people are familiar with Caribou and Grizzly from watching TV shows. I think many of them like to think that it still exists. And so, people like myself can talk about it and say how wonderful it is. Most people have empathy toward that feeling. You can talk about all of the science that you want but what people respond to, let's say in a Tiger, is it's beauty, not it's habit. People have an emotional attachment to these intangible values.

MR. KAYE: That seemed to be a major, I guess, aspect of the Muries. And it seemed to be connected to their sense of humility and restraint in the face of perhaps something larger than themselves. Was that your impression of them?

DR. SCHALLER: Nobody that wanders in remote areas can really do so without a sense of humility, that you don't count for much. I think when you're in the towns and surrounded by your cultural safety, people show a lot of arrogance. But if you are alone in the middle of nowhere dependent entirely on yourself, you can't help but feel somewhat full of humility. But this doesn't mean that Olaus, for example, was full of humility in all aspects. He was very forceful in what he believed in and conveying that message even though he did it in a low-key way. He was a very determined person.

MR. KAYE: The Caribou seemed to, very early in the campaign to establish the Refuge, become a symbol of something, perhaps a symbol of the issue. Perhaps it was their wildness that they symbolized. Did you get a sense that that was perhaps why Caribou very soon became such an important visual image of this place?

DR. SCHALLER: It became, setting up any reserve these days, is in essence, symbolic. You can make a lot of scientific reasons why it's good to have a place that's not been trashed because you need a baseline of information to measure change somewhere else. You need a reservoir of species in case you want to rehabilitate some habitat. You can draw on those places to get species for reintroduction. You can make all of those kinds of arguments. But I think a lot of people want to keep some of their past. They honor the past by keeping some of the wilderness unaffected by greed, unaffected by intrusion. And I think this is what is so terribly sad in Alaska, where you have all of these options and you have all of these members of Congress that seem to have no thought for saving anything beautiful with real intangible values for the future. I mean, people in Congress like Frank Merkowsky and Ted Stevens, I think they are a real dark stain; or will be considered such on Alaska's past in the future.

MR. KAYE: Well, moving on to some of the other values that the Muries and others espoused, and you must have experienced in terms of recreation. I know that you went

on a long solo trip during your Sheenjek expedition. I was wondering, what type wilderness characteristics were important, what type of recreational experience was it thought this place should serve?

DR. SCHALLER: Olaus, when he was promoting the Refuge, talked to a lot of hunting groups in Alaska. He stressed to them that they would, he hoped, be allowed to continue to hunt the sheep and so forth in the area. He certainly believed that local people should be able to continue their traditional life and kill some wildlife for subsistence. People go in nowadays to run the rivers like the Sheenjek and the Hula-Hula. They go in for trekking. They go in for fishing. It's all low numbers and therefore, low impact. That is, I think the perfect way to have it.

MR. KAYE: Can you tell me a little bit about the solo trip that you made from Last Lake?

DR. SCHALLER: Well, I felt that I wanted to see some of the high country. So I went for what, about ten days I think. I just carried an air mattress, a sleeping bag and some food. I set off walking up the Sheenjek up to the divide, down the fork of the Chandalar and back to get an impression of the area. This was one of the things that the whole expedition was about. It was to take a sample area and see what the values are. Of course we did science too. Brina Kessel particularly emphasized the birds. I did a little bit of everything. Bob Kreer was particularly interested in taking a film of the expedition. Everybody had their tasks, which I think they did with great enthusiasm.

MR. KAYE: So, was one of the purposes of the expedition to gain photos and other images that could be used to protect the area in the campaign?

DR. SCHALLER: Well, I think that certainly the film that Bob Kreer took served that purpose. It helps, because if you give people a visual image, then they can really see what you are talking about. But that was really secondary to just getting a feeling for the place.

MR. KAYE: I noticed that you wrote an article that appeared in Outdoor Life. I think it was entitled *New Area for Hunters*, which I understand maybe wasn't your title. But was it your purpose in writing that to gain support for the area, to convey what was out there?

DR. SCHALLER: Well, there are several purposes in writing any popular article. One most definitely was to advertise the area. Another was to describe what was up there. And I, being a poor graduate student, also did it to make a little extra money.

MR. KAYE: Just a couple more questions here. You describe yourself as a Naturalist, as opposed to say, a Biologist or an Ecologist. What's the difference, in your view? Is there a difference?

DR. SCHALLER: I can sometimes describe myself in various ways; conservationist, conservation biologist, naturalist, and so forth. And Naturalist is probably the most general in that it encompasses in many ways, both the science and the more popular aspects of communicating your science to the public.

MR. KAYE: Finally, I guess you know what the Carter program, held last year, the dedication of the Carter Archives, you gave a talk. You talked quiet a bit about the Murie Expedition on your life. You also said that there are just a whole host of reasons why you value the Arctic Refuge and reasons for keeping it as wilderness. Could you summarize what you feel the value of the Arctic Refuge is today, and to the people of the future?

DR. SCHALLER: I don't remember what I said over a year ago. But most definitely, there are various reasons. Some of them are general and apply not just to the Arctic Refuge. But the Arctic Refuge really is a place of living grandeur. It's throbbing with life. It's not a barren desert, as it's often pictured by people who want to go in to plunder and pollute. It's really also an Arctic legacy of world importance that you must treat with respect and restraint. I think it emphasizes also the fundamental values of American society. What kind of people are we that we would want to destroy the last remnants of beauty in this country? Do we lack all restraint? I think wilderness values are too precious to permit them to succumb to special interests. Certainly one question that must be asked is: What is ethical and aesthetically correct? Not just, what is economically and politically expedient. As the past four decades since ANWR was established has shown conservationists may win some battle, but there is never final victory. You have to fight the same battles over and over and over again because the forces of destruction are always waiting. So, I think it's up to everybody that cares at all about the natural environment in world and especially in the United States, to show constant vigilance and clarity of purpose, and commitment and compassion for areas like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. This is so that it will last not just in years or decades but it will have to last for centuries if we really want to prevent the Arctic Refuge from vanishing.

MR. KAYE: It's interesting that you said that the Arctic Refuge reflects the values of American society and perhaps this question of whether it should be open for development or preserved as wilderness reflects that I guess. The potential for it being a symbol for our society's willingness to restrain itself, or some broader purpose?

DR. SCHALLER: You don't know what the future will bring. Therefore we should not destroy the past and the future through our ignorance. Especially not, when everybody

knows that has had any interest in the area at all, that the oil not needed. The oil is likely to be exported. Nobody knows how much oil there is. And you also know that there is no environmentally sound ways of getting it out. The wilderness will be destroyed the minute you put a building and you put a road and pipelines in. That wilderness ceases to exist. All you have to do is look next-door at Prudhoe Bay, which has 800 square miles of development. They say, "Oh we're so much better these days". I don't believe a word of it. The minute you allow anything in the way of development in the coastal plane particularly, which is so sensitive. It's the main area where the Caribou go to calve. You will destroy it forevermore.

MR. KAYE: I guess you would lose that sense of wildness that Olaus talks so much about. It seems that so many of these writings were dominated by that word, or that adjective, "wild". Is that a central feature that you feel would be lost to development, more than perhaps numbers of Caribou?

DR. SCHALLER: Caribou will certainly decrease because they go there for a very good reason and that's why they've gone there for maybe hundreds of thousands of years. But who will want to see wilderness by going over roads, or tripping over pipelines, seeing smoke stacks and oil rigs in the distance. That's not wilderness. You don't have to go up there to see Caribou in that kind of situation. There simply has to be some place left in North America for future generations that is unaffected by greed.

MR. KAYE: Well, I want to thank you for this interview.

DR. SCHALLER: Your welcome.

...I just got a letter from Janet Jorgenson. She wants some photos of the Sheenjek. Unfortunately, I didn't take habitat shots, but I'll send her some and see if she can use them. They are looking at tree growth. I am sure a person like that enjoys being out there, not just doing tree borings.

MR. KAYE: Oh yeah. Well again, thank you. If there is anything I can do to help you in your work, please let me know.

DR. SCHALLER: Thanks a lot.

MR. KAYE: If you come through Fairbanks, or Alaska, we'd sure hope to meet you.

DR. SCHALLER: I'll stop by.

MR. KAYE: O.K., Thanks again.