

# The Register-Guard

OREGON COAST

## Wilbur Ternyik, protector of Oregon Coast, dies at 92

The former Florence mayor led a 1970s commission that drew up the state's coastal plan



1/6 - Wilbur Ternyik plays with a bald eagle, one of many wild animals he cared for over the years, at his Florence home in 1988. (The Register-Guard)

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FLORENCE — Wilbur Ternyik, often seen in a tan buckskin jacket, used a tomahawk as a gavel when he led meetings in the 1970s for a state commission that established land use rules to guide thoughtful development on the Oregon Coast.

The decorative tomahawk and coat served as eye-catching symbols of his Native American heritage, and they commanded respect, said longtime friend Kathy Bridges.

"You already know that he is in charge," she said of Ternyik's signature look.

Ternyik died Monday in Florence at age 92.



A lifelike bronze bust of him on display at the Siuslaw Pioneer Museum in Florence depicts him in that iconic look — but Ternyik will be remembered for much more.

His impact on the Oregon Coast was conservational — he helped stop drifting dunes by planting grass and guided state and federal laws to protect coastal natural resources — as well as civic-minded — he served the Florence area as a commissioner, mayor and councilor. He even tended to a menagerie of orphaned animals.

“Wilbur had an amazing number of accomplishments,” said Lincoln County Planning Director Onno Husing, another longtime friend.

From 1971 to 1975, Ternyik chaired the Oregon Coastal Conservation and Development Commission, which had notable task of developing an overall land use plan for the Oregon Coast. And was Florence mayor for six years, a Florence city councilor for 10 years and a part of the Siuslaw Port Commission for 29 years.

Surviving family includes his wife of 56 years, Joyce Ternyik of Florence. The couple raised three sons and two daughters.

Ternyik’s devotion to protecting the Oregon Coast from unchecked development drove his public service and earned him friendships with notable Oregon leaders of all types.

He was friends with Democrats and Republicans, environmentalists and developers, and just about anyone else interested in the coast, said Bridges, who knew Ternyik for more than 40 years.

Ternyik’s allies included former Oregon Gov. Tom McCall, Sen. Mark Hatfield and Sen. Wayne Morse, Husing said.

“Wilbur knew all the greats in Oregon politics during that era,” Husing said, “but the relationship that meant the most to Wilbur, I believe by a country mile, was his genuine friendship with Mark Hatfield. Boy, that was the secret sauce for so much of Wilbur’s influence.”

And for years Ternyik was the most influential figure on the Oregon Coast, he said. The coastal commission’s decisions laid the groundwork for state and federal land use laws.

Bridges, executive director of the philanthropic Bridges Foundation, led the effort to recognize Ternyik with the bronze statue.

Ternyik’s mother was a direct descendant of Chief Coboway, a Clatsop Indian leader who met with Meriwether Lewis and William Clark when they reached the Pacific Coast in 1804. His father was a Hungarian immigrant, giving him the unique surname.

Ternyik oversaw coastal commission meetings with wit and zeal. The tomahawk gavel might have been his most visible expression of character, but the 29 other commission members would leave meetings quoting Ternyik’s one-liners or remarking about his passion to wisely develop the Oregon Coast while considering natural resource preservation.

“God broke the mold when he made Wilbur,” Jim Ross, former executive director of the coastal commission, told The Register-Guard in 2006.

Ternyik was a product of the Oregon Coast and a proud World War II veteran. Born on Jan. 26, 1926, he went on to graduate from Warrenton High School near Astoria, before joining the U.S. Marine Corps in 1944. He was injured in fighting at Okinawa, Japan and returned to Astoria in 1945, then moved to Florence in 1947.

Ternyik came to the Lane County coastal city with a mission to stop the spread of dunes. Husing said dunes were spreading throughout the Oregon Coast at the time, covering houses, roads and train tracks.

Ternyik, working for the federal Soil Conservation Service (precursor to today’s Natural Resource Conservation Service), stabilized dunes around Florence by planting European beach grass. He went on to start his own landscaping business, Wave Beachgrass Nursery.

Like the coastal commission, Ternyik left an impression on Florence politics. He was Florence mayor from 1985 to 1988 and again from 1991 to 1992, said Roger McCorkle, who served as mayor between Ternyik’s two terms.

"He's was always very much of a civic-minded man," McCorkle said. "He didn't worry about how much time it took him to do what needed to be done for the community, and that's what he did."

Ternyik was an avid hunter and trapper but in the 1980s, no longer comfortable killing animals, he switched to being a healer instead. He and his wife, Joyce, tended to orphaned, sick and injured wildlife in their backyard, and they held a permit with the state to provide the care.

"He was like a Doctor Dolittle," Husing said.

Bonding with animals on the mend helped Ternyik balance out the stress of politics.

"The meetings I go to are often tense, and I get all uptight," Ternyik told The Register-Guard in 1991. "But afterward, I can come out here in the yard and sit on the stump. The deer comes along with me, and pretty soon, here comes the raccoon. Hey, things settle down in a hurry."

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