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Green Mountain Environmental Leadership Awards honor Vermont projects

One of the winners of the second annual Green Mountain Environmental Leadership awards studies trout in Lake Champlain. Another focuses on the health of streams, some of which feed into the lake. Yet another connects young people with the glory of raptors that ply the skies over the lake. And the fourth was a women who navigated some of Vermont's most difficult environmental battles, some of which happened within sight of the lake.

So it was fitting, then, that the awards were announced Tuesday evening at the ECHO Lake Aquarium and Science Center on Burlington's waterfront, where a bright spring sun and a glinting Lake Champlain nearly stole the show.

Speakers at the event said the awards help educate the public about threats to our environment and our surroundings, and provide examples of people who are seeking solutions.

"If we teach our children to love the environment, we will save the environment," said Elizabeth Courtney, one of the award winners.

The Green Mountain Environmental Leadership Awards honor people who, as collaborators, citizen scientists or individuals who don't give up, help us gain insights into Vermont's most vexing environmental problems and show us ways to fix them. The awards were hosted by ECHO, FreePressMedia and AllEarth Renewables.



Green Mountain Environmental Leadership Award winners pose after a ceremony at ECHO in Burlington on Tuesday, April 17, 2012. From left to right are Elizabeth Courtney, Justin Kenney, Jim Pease, Jessica Andreoletti, Dan Albrecht, Markie Palermo and Rodney Olsen. (GLENN RUSSELL, Free Press)

The winners were:

- **Collaboration Award:** The Chittenden County Stream Team, consisting of towns, organizations and other local governments who coordinating with one another to encourage residents to help reduce pollution in local streams. Members of the groups say the best way to help the region's streams is to encourage people to understand pollution and get their hands wet doing something about it.

• **Persistence Toward Achieving Results Award:** Courtney, of the Vermont Natural Resources Council. In her long **career** in the Vermont environmental field, Courtney said she has learned that the best way both to protect the environment and to promote economic growth is to find ways to work with would-be opponents to find the best solutions.

• **Citizen Scientist Award:** Two winners were announced. One, Markie Palermo, 17, of South Hero, conducted DNA testing on fish to show that the introduction of brown trout in the Lake Champlain basin was hurting populations of native brook trout. The other, Rodney Olson, runs the Diversified Occupations Program for Addison County. His **students** capture and band birds and use math, reading and science to help the students learn about the environment and gain confidence in themselves.

Keeping with the lake theme, Tuesday's keynote speaker was Mary Watzin, dean and professor in the Rubenstein **School** of Environment and Natural Resources at the University of Vermont.

Watzin has extensively studied Lake Champlain, and she said her **work** would be impossible without the help of people who might not have scientific training but who do possess a deep interest in and love of Lake Champlain and the environment.

A man walking along the shore first discovered zebra mussels in Lake Champlain, Watzin noted. And divers who were poking around sunken wrecks found crumpled shells, showing that unlike in other lakes, fish were able to eat zebra mussels in Lake Champlain, helping to keep their population partly in check.

Lake Champlain and the environment in general are far more than an interesting scientific curiosity, Watzin said.

"It's beautiful, wild nature," she said, adding that the lake soothes calm nerves and stimulates imagination, and creativity, too. "When I've had a bad day, I look at the lake," she said.

People are changing the lake for the worse, she said — but also working to preserve it. "It needs a lot of friends. It needs a whole community, and that's where you guys come in," Watzin told the award nominees and others gathered at the ECHO Center.

After the awards were presented, winners gathered on an outdoor deck for photographs. Behind them, a brilliant sunset lit up the sky over the lake. It was nature stealing the show again.

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