



**AMERICAN  
PRAIRIE**

Celebrating  
the Indomitable  
American Spirit

## **Dr. Sylvia Earle awarded 2024 Ken Burns American Heritage Prize**

*Presented by American Prairie in celebration of the indomitable American spirit*

**NEW YORK, NY** — President and chairman of Mission Blue and former Chief Scientist of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), **Dr. Sylvia Earle** accepted the 2024 **Ken Burns American Heritage Prize** at an event held on May 1 at the American Museum of Natural History.

Named in honor of America’s most revered visual historian and documentary filmmaker, the [Ken Burns American Heritage Prize](#) recognizes an individual whose body of work has advanced our collective understanding of the indomitable American spirit.

Emmy®-award winner Sam Waterston, whose acting career in theater, television, and film has spanned over five decades, introduced Ken Burns by calling his friend, a “great American” for his work to educate the public on serious, complex issues and imprint a message that is understandable and relatable through his filmmaking.

“Ken has been doing just that for almost fifty years,” said Waterston. “His films have been showing ourselves to ourselves—blemishes and all—and searching for resolution through that indomitable American spirit as seen throughout our history.”

Dr. Sylvia Earle is known for her incredible work as an American oceanographer, explorer, author, and lecturer with a lifetime of experience as a field research scientist, government official, and director for corporate and non-profit organizations. Mr. Burns welcomed Dr. Earle by saying, “Tonight we honor one of the most daring pioneers in the history of humankind.”

Mr. Burns went on to say, “Dr. Sylvia Earle has gone further, deeper, and longer than most anyone else on Earth, and her work is impacting the planet Earth in positive ways --- ways that have already created a legacy for scientists and explorers the world over to follow.”

Dr. Earle is the president and chairman of [Mission Blue](#), a National Geographic Society Explorer at Large, Founder of Deep Ocean Exploration and Research Inc. (DOER), Chair of the Advisory Council for the Harte Research Institute, and former Chief Scientist of NOAA. She earned her doctorate at Duke University after which she launched her lifelong mission of cataloging every plant species in the Gulf of Mexico.

Dr. Earle was the leader of Tektite II, an expedition sponsored by the U.S. Navy, the Department of the Interior, and NASA in which scientists lived for two consecutive weeks underwater. The expedition

achieved scientific breakthroughs advancing knowledge of marine life and elevated worldwide public awareness of the importance of conservation of the seas and its various life forms.

Dr. Earle was NOAA's first chief scientist and founder of the Ocean Exploration and Research Corporation and led the first team of United States Women Aquanauts. She was instrumental in persuading President George W. Bush to create the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument around the Hawaiian Atolls and in encouraging President Obama to expand the Monument creating the world's largest marine protected area.

More recently, she led the Google Ocean Advisory Council, a team of 30 marine scientists providing content and scientific oversight for the "Ocean in Google Earth." To date, she has led over 100 expeditions, logging more than 7,500 hours underwater.

In recognizing "Her Deepness," as Dr. Earle has become known, and all of her many accomplishments, Mr. Burns joked he would need an aqualung to get through naming the list of awards she has been honored with in her lifetime.

After receiving the bison bronze, Dr. Earle thanked Mr. Burns and American Prairie saying, "I'm speaking for the ocean and speaking for those who have enabled me to go deep in the ocean, to spend thousands of hours under the sea. It's not about me, it's about me being a conduit for those creatures who can't speak for themselves and for all of those who haven't yet seen what some of us have been privileged to see."



Dr. Earle was then joined on stage by American Prairie CEO Alison Fox for a conversation about the similarities between the two conservation organizations.



“We almost exterminated the great whales just as we almost exterminated the bison. We did succeed in exterminating so much wildlife on the land and in the ocean, but we don't notice it so much in the ocean because until fairly recently we have not had the capacity to get down to where most of life on earth actually lives,” said Dr. Earle. “I think this is the best time ever to be alive because of the capacity to see what no one could see before and we still have time, not a lot, but we still have time to change this trajectory of decline to recovery and you're doing it with American Prairie. You're giving back.”

When asked by Ms. Fox about reasons for hope in conserving the planet's oceans and prairie, Dr. Earle responded, “We know what to do. We have evidence. Technology gives us the ability to be high in the sky, deep in the ocean, to connect with those minds all over the world, to see ourselves, to see the predicament we're in and to really understand this is not a story of a fantasy. This is reality and we have the best chance we will ever have right now if we really make it a priority. Restore nature, the blue and the green all together.”

Dr. Earle received the honor from Mr. Burns and American Prairie's National Board of Directors Chair, Bill Hilf. The evening's festivities included additional remarks by Ms. Fox and Mr. Hilf.

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## **About American Prairie**

American Prairie's vision is to create a vast and collaboratively managed prairie destination that serves as a fully functioning ecosystem for wildlife and offers visitors permanent access to the landscape that shaped our nation's character. American Prairie also offers visitors an opportunity to learn about and connect with nature on a truly grand scale. Learn more at [americanprairie.org](http://americanprairie.org).

## **About Ken Burns**

[Ken Burns](#) has been making documentary films for almost 50 years. Since the Academy Award®-nominated *Brooklyn Bridge* in 1981, Ken has gone on to direct and produce some of the most acclaimed historical documentaries ever made, including *The Civil War*, *Baseball*, *Jazz*, *The War*, *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*, *Prohibition*, *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History*, *The Vietnam War*, *Country Music*, and, most recently, *The American Buffalo*.

Future film projects include *Leonardo da Vinci*, *The American Revolution*, *Emancipation to Exodus*, and *LBJ & the Great Society*, among others.

Ken's films have been honored with dozens of major awards, including 17 Emmy® Awards, two GRAMMY® Awards, and two Oscar nominations. In September of 2008, at the News & Documentary Emmy Awards, Ken was honored by the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences with a Lifetime Achievement Award. In November of 2022, Ken was inducted into the Television Academy Hall of Fame.

## **About Dr. Sylvia Earle**

Dr. Sylvia Earle is the President and Chairman of [Mission Blue](#), a National Geographic Society Explorer at Large, Founder of Deep Ocean Exploration and Research Inc. (DOER), Chair of the Advisory Council for the Harte Research Institute, former Chief Scientist of NOAA, and an Ocean Elder.

Dr. Earle is the author of more than 225 publications and leader of more than 100 expeditions with years at sea and thousands of hours under the ocean. She is a graduate of Florida State University with M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Duke University and 32 honorary degrees. Her research concerns the ecology and conservation of marine ecosystems and the development of technology for access to the deep sea.

Dr. Earle served on the National Advisory Committee on Oceans and Atmosphere, and she led the first all-woman team of aquanauts in Tektite II, the first scientists-in-the-sea program, where she and her team spent two weeks working and living in an underwater laboratory. She was instrumental in persuading President George W. Bush to create the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument around the Hawaiian Atolls and in encouraging President Obama to expand the Monument creating the world's largest marine protected area. She led the Google Ocean Advisory Council which provided content and scientific oversight for the "Ocean in Google Earth" in collaboration with Google, DOER, National Geographic Society, and the U.S. Navy.

Dr. Earle co-hosts the "Dive in with Liz and Sylvia" webinar series, sponsored by Ocean Elders. She is the subject of the Emmy® Award Winning Netflix documentary, *Mission Blue*, and the recipient of more than 100 national and international honors and awards including being named *Time* Magazine's first Hero for the Planet, a Living Legend by the Library of Congress, 2014 UNEP Champion of the Earth, *Glamour* Magazine's 2014 Woman of the Year, member of the Netherlands Order of the Golden Ark, and winner of the 2009 TED Prize, the Walter Cronkite Award, the 1996 Explorers Club Medal, the Royal Geographic Society 2011 Patron's Medal, and the National Geographic 2013 Hubbard Medal.