

Sosa Named OCCA Conservationist of the Year

COOPERSTOWN – Otsego County Conservation Association has announced that Al Sosa is the recipient of its 2011 Conservationist of the Year award. Sosa is being recognized for his dedication to bicycle and pedestrian trail building and maintenance, as well as for his leadership role in the fostering of natural resource appreciation and stewardship. Sosa, a retired SUNY-Oneonta physical education professor, developed and continues to teach mountain biking courses at both the beginning and intermediate levels.

Sosa was nominated by OCCA Board member Mark Davies, who applauded his work with local landowners, city, school district, and university officials, and volunteers to build a multi-use trail network of more than 46 miles (and growing) within the greater Oneonta community. Davies also commended Sosa for his philosophy of giving back to the community. Through his classes and as advisor to the Oneonta State Mountain Biking Club, Sosa engages college students in trail maintenance and improvement as well as trail building and design, giving them a better understanding of, and appreciation for, the natural world.

"While conservation is often seen as working to preserve something, I would argue that encouraging students to build a relationship with the natural world and become stewards of their physical environment is very much in the spirit of conserving and protecting," wrote Davies.

"Last spring, students dedicated a trail developed up behind the high school and behind Wilber Park. We have worked with city parks and recreation, Hartwick College, private property owners, the New York State Department of Transportation and others to develop trails all around this community," Sosa said. "Maintenance, improvement, design and development – we've become pretty sophisticated."

According to Davies, Sosa leads students and volunteers in the creation of trails that are sensitive to the ecology.

"His trails carefully avoid wetlands, use rock beds to allow natural water runoff, and incorporate water diverting techniques to ensure that trails are not prone to excessive erosion. Al has also built many bridges over seasonal streams, the mill raceway on New Island, and in other sensitive areas. I have seen these trails stand up to wet springs and have found them to be some of the best trails in the area," said Davies.

Sosa, who also organizes and conducts Sunday morning community rides, said he loves being outdoors and working in the woods.

"I like working on trails, and my background in construction lends itself to this type of work. I also enjoy working with students. They leave something very positive for this community, and take skills with them to other communities," Sosa explained. "Yes, I have a passion for this – it's very rewarding to see people out there enjoying these trails and it's very rewarding to get to ride them myself."

Sosa said the trails that he builds and maintains with students and volunteers are designed for multi-use, low impact, non-motorized activity and to be easily sustainable.

"I firmly believe that healthy trails will help build a healthy community," Sosa added.

Sam Brown-Shaklee, president of the Oneonta State Mountain Biking Club, praised Sosa for his dedication to, and passion for, trail stewardship and for sharing that passion with those around him.

"I have gained a lot from my relationship with Al over the past three years," Brown-Shaklee explained. "He introduced me to trail design and since then we have been part of a growing effort to develop outdoor recreation in Oneonta. Through this experience, I have found a love for trail design, construction and maintenance which I intend to pursue professionally.

"For many of us in the [club], Al Sosa has been a mentor, role model and friend. We respect and love him for his dedication and hope that when we turn 67 we might be as active as he is today," Brown-Shaklee said.

This year, OCCA will present three additional awards to businesses and individuals who have made a positive difference related to environmental protection, preservation or education in Otsego County.

Golden Artist Colors, Inc. of New Berlin will receive the Business Conservation Award for keeping thousands of gallons of paint from landfill disposal for the last 13 years; Karen Sheckells of Friends of Glimmerglass State Park, Inc. has earned Special Recognition for Environmental Excellence for increasing and enhancing community awareness and participation in a diverse array of environmental education events; and the "Green Business" Award will be given to Bassett Medical Center, Cooperstown for its initiatives to reduce, reuse, recycle or manage waste in more sustainable ways and to increase energy efficiency in existing or new processes.

Award recipients will be honored at OCCA's Annual Dinner, to be held on Friday, November 18 at the Holiday Inn Oneonta/Cooperstown, 5206 State Highway 23 in Oneonta.

"We are delighted to have such a diverse group of honorees this year," said OCCA Acting Executive Director Darla M. Youngs. "Our award winners demonstrate in countless ways how both individuals and businesses can successfully work to protect and preserve our environment. More importantly, they're doing a great job of it."

Erin Heard, tributary strategy specialist for the Upper Susquehanna Coalition and outreach coordinator/river trail manager for the Headwaters River Trail, will give the keynote address at this year's Annual Dinner.

Heard's presentation will cover the history of the Upper Susquehanna Coalition, how USC came to manage the water trail, the partnership process, what has been accomplished, and where organizers hope to go in the future. She will also talk about the Susquehanna Sojourn – a multi-

day, group-oriented annual paddling event emphasizing environmental and cultural education – which will embark from Otsego Lake in the summer of 2012.

OCCA's Annual Dinner will feature a new Silent Auction component this year. Doors open at 5:30 p.m. for the Silent Auction preview – dinner attendees are encouraged to bring their checkbooks, and to bid early and often! Items must be paid for and taken at the end of the evening unless other arrangements are made; cash or check only.

Annual Dinner menu choices are roast prime rib of beef au jus, chicken Kiev or vegetarian stuffed peppers. All selections include salad, vegetables, potatoes or rice, rolls, dessert and tea or coffee. There will be a cash bar at 6 p.m., followed by the dinner and program at 7 p.m. Reservations, \$35 per person, are required by Friday, November 11. For more information, visit www.occainfo.org or e-mail admin@occainfo.org