



Will Steger has spent most of his life traveling to the type of fascinating places that the rest of us can only dream about – the North Pole, Greenland and Ellesmere Island, the northernmost island in the Canadian Arctic. For the past 45 years, the Arctic region has served as both classroom and cause for the popular Minnesota explorer, who has frequently ventured through the vast area via dogsled, braving subzero temperatures and extreme conditions.

Along the way, Steger has observed significant changes in this climate and learned first hand the impact global warming is having on the northern environment. For example, the summer ice in the Arctic Region has diminished markedly over the past quarter of a century and temperatures have started to rise. Both of these factors have the potential to greatly impact the wildlife in the region, which could eventually drive species such as polar bears, caribou, seals and walrus to extinction.



Will Steger has spent most of his life travelling and fight against global warming

Now at age 64, Steger is more focused than ever before on raising awareness about the worsening situation in the Arctic while helping people of all ages recognize the ways in which they can make a difference in the fight against global warming. Steger believes there are definite similarities between the young people of today who are embracing the urgency of addressing issues facing the environment and the once-young activists of his own generation –those he calls “the sixties generation” – who also believed in bringing heartfelt passion and commitment to a cause.

“I see a connection between the younger generation – the emerging leaders— and the boomers who are coming up,” Steger explains. “The difference is that today’s young people are more worldly than many of us were when we were younger and they have better technology and better ways to communicate.”

One of the ways Steger himself facilitated this improved method of technological education occurred during his own 1995 expedition, when he spearheaded the first dogsled traverse to

the Arctic Ocean in one season traveling from Russia to Canada by way of the North Pole. While he was there, he completed daily online journals that literally brought more than 20 million students along for the fascinating ride. Steger and his team also transmitted digital photographic images from the North Pole for the first time in history.

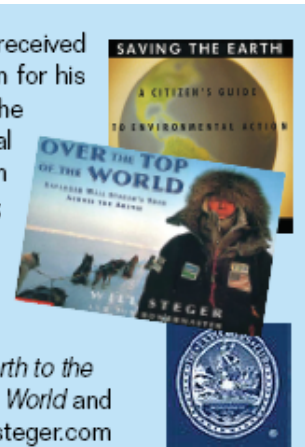
While technology can help increase interest and awareness for people of all ages, Steger has become especially interested in engaging his contemporaries in the work of those who are tackling the issue of global warming. “I think that once people get to a certain age, they are looking for a purpose. The key to longevity is a purposeful life, one that is fulfilling for body, mind and spirit,” says Steger. “There’s more to life than pursuing a life of luxury.”

It is famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright who has served as a role model of sorts for Steger in recent years. “His career didn’t really take off until he was 64 years old and he lived to be 94,” explains Steger. “For the last 30 years of his life, he had incredible purpose and made outstanding contributions.”

Becoming engaged in a worthwhile pursuit, whatever that might be, is something Steger believes is very important and can go a long way to helping seniors feel part of a bigger world. “Something has gone wrong in the past 30 years. People are more socially disconnected and isolated,” he says.

Over the course of his career, Will Steger has received a host of awards and honors in recognition for his work on behalf of the environment including the John Oliver LaGorce Medal from the National Geographic Society, which also awarded him the first Explorer-in-Residence award in 1996; the Lindbergh Award from the Lindbergh Foundation; and the Lowell Thomas Award from the Explorers Club.

Steger is also the author of four books: *North to the Pole*, *Saving the Earth*, *Over the Top of the World* and *Crossing Antarctica*. Available at www.willsteger.com



The best way to connect, Steger says, is to become active in what he calls “your own sphere of influence.” He explains, “Whether it’s in your community, neighborhood or an environmental club, it makes all the difference when you get with like-minded people. Not only is it a really good social opportunity, but the involvement in a cause provides that sense of purpose.”

Throughout the years, Steger has had the opportunity to testify before the United States Congress and also provide his expertise on the environmental needs of Antarctica to many world leaders. In 2006, Steger launched the Will Steger Foundation and its goal is to “promote change through education and advocacy and to foster international leadership and cooperation through environmental education and policy.”

As a part of this mission, Steger often participates in public forums and his foundation encourages the formation of local community groups that are committed to change and advocacy. A recent event in Minneapolis, spotlighting “green” jobs for people of color, was an “amazing experience,” according to Steger. “There were so many great connections that happened,” he says. Steger says his own view of the world really began to change when, at the age of 17, he spent time kayaking in Alaska. “I remember the map I had and there were big, blank areas on it that had the word “unmapped” stenciled over them,” he recalls.

It was on this trip that Steger met some men who had a profound influence on him. “There were some old timers who had been part of the gold rush in Alaska in the late 1800’s who

were still around,” he says. “Talking to them and hearing their stories had a big effect on me.” In those days, Steger, who says he found it hard to fathom the depth of the Arctic, never believed that the region would change in the way it has since that time. “I feel very fortunate to have seen it the way it was during that period,” he says. “To be honest, even five years ago, I never would have imagined that the acceleration of the warming would have been as fast as it has been.”

Although he had originally planned to cross Antarctica on kite-skis this year, Steger has opted to skip the expedition and focus his energies on the mission of his foundation. “That’s a trip that would have required a lot of energy and fundraising, so I decided to work on education and getting the messages of the foundation out instead,” he says. Steger is also encouraged by the new administration in Washington and the interest expressed in addressing the global warming crisis.

“I believe President Obama brings the right intelligence and the right positions,” Steger says. “I have a lot of real confidence in that.” Although he won’t be heading out on any Arctic expeditions this year, Steger still travels extensively to promote his work. “I don’t really travel because I like to. I’d actually like to stay home more,” he says. Steger splits his time at home between Ely, Minnesota and a houseboat on the Mississippi River that is usually docked in Saint Paul.

For those who perhaps can’t travel as much as they once did, Steger says there are still ways to engage in work and service to find purpose and meaning later in life. “Purpose and service have nothing to do with mobility,” he claims. One way to become engaged is via the Internet where Steger says the wide availability of research and information can help put people in touch with a subject or cause that interests them.

While acknowledging that circumstances in life can change, Steger is a big believer in the power of the wisdom that he and his peers have acquired over the years. “We’ve all worked hard for the knowledge we have today,” he says. “It’s like a bank that we can tap into. I think that’s what makes these years great ones.”

For more information about the Will Steger Foundation, visit the website at www.willstegerfoundation.org The site also features links to a wide variety of other research and information sources.



Photo courtesy of the University of Minnesota Sea Grant Program