



# Keith Reopelle

## A lifelong journey of environmentalism

By Amanda N. Wegner

In the sixth grade, Keith Reopelle was voted by his classmates as most likely to head up the Environmental Protection Agency.

And so began his lifelong journey of environmentalism.

Reopelle is senior policy director of Clean Wisconsin, the state's largest environmental advocacy organization, which works for clean water, clean air and clean energy. Long involved with climate change, he's leading the organization's efforts to pass state-level climate change legislation in 2010.

### Voted most likely to be an enviro

Sometime before being pegged as leader of the EPA by his fellow sixth-graders in Milwaukee, Keith knew he wanted to do environmental work.

"My dad would take my brother and I hunting and fishing," recalls Keith. "I just loved being outdoors. Actually, I probably knew I would do environmental work before the EPA thing."

So what clued in his classmates to his future life's work?

He loved litter drives.

"They were a trendy thing at the time. I'd march through neighborhoods picking up trash," says Keith with a laugh. "I guess I did a lot of that."

In fact, Keith and another student once went with their teacher to a paper company in the Fox Valley to accept an environmental award for picking up litter. But chasing after litterbugs wasn't his life's dream. A fan of the outdoors, Keith went to college, first to UW-Milwaukee, then UW-Madison, and got his bachelor's degree in Wildlife Ecology and a master's in Agricultural Journalism.

"I knew I'd end up going to Madison or Stevens Point," says Keith, explaining that both have good environmental programs. But Madison won out because of football.

"My brother, he's about five years older, was in Madison. He got me tickets to a football game and I was hooked. That made up my mind."

Keith put himself through graduate school, for the most part, working as a canvasser (one of those people who go door-to-door seeking support and/or donations for a cause) for Wisconsin's Environmental Decade, which is now Clean Wisconsin.

## Ripe for focus

Keith first started knocking on doors for the organization in 1982. With the exception of a brief stint with another environmental group in the early 2000s, he's been with the organization ever since, working for years as a lobbyist and program director, and one year as executive director.

Since returning in 2005, Keith has focused primarily on climate change. With its focus on clean energy, climate change is a natural extension of Clean Wisconsin's work and increased action and awareness in recent years called for an organizational change.

"[Climate change] just became ripe for focus, so it was appropriate for me to shift the focus of my work to working on climate change at the state and regional level."

Keith was a member of Governor Doyle's Global Warming Task Force, a diverse group of people who crafted recommendations for reducing the state's greenhouse gas emissions while creating new jobs.

Though independent, peer-reviewed science overwhelmingly supports climate change, it hasn't fallen into the realm of "universal truth" and much opposition remains. While recent polls show two-thirds to three-fourths of Americans do believe climate change is real, caused by humans, and something should be done about it, it's never easy to work in the face of adversity. Keith says his deep-rooted belief allows him to keep fighting for the cause that has long dominated his life and career.

"For a number of years, especially in the '90s and the beginning of this century, I tried to use the best numbers, the latest modeling, to make the case," says Keith. "But at this point, it's no longer important to convince the naysayers, but to work with your advocates."

Which is a lesson, he adds, he learned fast as a canvasser.

"Like anything, we're not trying to change people's minds, but reach out to those people who already support the cause."

## Still an outdoorsman

When he's not championing environmental causes, Keith remains an outdoorsman, and in his limited free time loves to fish, particularly for muskies. And much like his father did for him, Keith has worked hard to share the great outdoors with his two daughters, who are both, appropriately, named after

birds, going camping and fishing, though he admits that the girls aren't as fond of fishing as he.

"It's hard to get teenage girls in a boat to fish."

Camping trips and time away with his wife are a priority as well, and serve as a nice break from the political volleying that is a regular part of the job.

"What I do is very rewarding, but it certainly has its challenges. And there's nothing like a few days enjoying Wisconsin's landscapes and natural resources to recharge the spirit to keep up the fight."

*Amanda Wegner is a freelance writer and editor in Madison.*



## Four environmental decades for Clean Wisconsin

This April brings the 40th anniversary of Earth Day ... as well as the 40th anniversary of Clean Wisconsin. For more information on the organization, as well as Clean Wisconsin's 40th anniversary bash, visit [www.cleanwisconsin.org](http://www.cleanwisconsin.org).

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