



Back row, from left, son Keith Langford, his wife Courtney, granddaughter Lilly Russell, daughter Robin Russell, her husband Kevin, grandson Guthrie Russell. Front row, from the left, grandson Huck Langford, grandson Harlan Russell, Myrna, and David K. Langford.

DAVID K. LANGFORD

Called to This Work

Article by **LORIE A. WOODWARD**

David K. Langford couldn't say no to Texas' wild things, wild places nor the people who take care of them. "The bottom line is that I had to do what I couldn't *not* do," said Langford, who, with his wife Myrna, manages their portion of his family's seven generation ranch near Comfort. "I was called to do this work."

Although he was reared in San Antonio, he spent weekends and every summer working on Hillingdon Ranch with his grandparents and extended family. He, alongside family and neighbors, would doctor livestock infested with screwworms, fix fences, cut hay with a horse-drawn cutter, shear sheep and goats, and do everything else that comes with ranch life.

"I grew up surrounded by land stewards—my immediate family, my extended family and all their friends and their families," Langford said. "Their passion for the land sparked a lifelong fire in me."

His affiliation with TWA began as one of the earliest members in 1985.

"I was one of a few dozen early joiners," said Langford, an award-winning wildlife, nature and western life photographer. "I served on the original board and executive committee along with the founders Larry Weishuhn, Murphy Ray and Gary Machen and future presidents MacLean Bowman, Richard Butler and Steve Lewis as well as others."



In 1990, the fledgling organization needed an executive director. At the time, Langford was the photographer of choice for premier ranches across the state, a career that gave him flexibility. Plus, Myrna was a respected government documents librarian at Trinity University, a job that provided necessary family benefits such as insurance, and both their children were away at college.

“I agreed to do it for a couple of months until we found somebody else,” Langford said. “Let me be clear right here, I couldn’t have done it for any length of time without Myrna’s help and support. She was—and is—my partner in conservation and life.”

The proffered couple of months turned into a 12-year stint as Executive Vice President. In 2002, Langford “sort of” retired, but was asked to continue to shepherd crucial water issues as Vice President Emeritus. In 2007, he retired from TWA completely to concentrate on photography and conservation publishing. He still holds the title Vice President Emeritus and provides input on issues when asked.

“The call to serve TWA spoke to my heart,” Langford said. “I got to work on behalf of all of the land stewards who are quietly and selflessly conserving Texas to the benefit of everyone else. That was important to me.”

TWA’s new headquarters building, slated for completion in late 2019 or early 2020, will bear his name. The David K. Langford Center is a lasting tribute to his service.

“I cannot imagine the honor of having the TWA headquarters bearing my name,” Langford said. “It seems unbelievable to be recognized for doing what my heart wouldn’t let me *not* do.”

IN THE BEGINNING

For those like Langford, who have been part of the organization since its inception, the new building marks how far the organization has come. For the first two years, TWA was housed in McLean Bowman’s garage.

When Langford took the reins, he and Charly McTee, who at Langford’s insistence was hired to serve as General Manager, moved to the association’s office at the Catholic Life Building in San Antonio. The men divided the responsibilities. McTee kept the administrative fires burning, while Langford burned up the road.

“When we hired Sharron Jay as the office manager a little later, I moved into a 10’ x 10’ storage room because I was always on the road—and we didn’t have the luxury of space,” Langford said.

In the beginning, Langford traveled from San Antonio to Austin almost every day because the organization was neither recognized nor welcomed by most of the state’s power structure. Knowing his job was to sway opinions and influence policy, Langford enrolled in a seminar that taught the basics of lobbying.

The audience included everyone from housewives and retirees to buttoned up attorneys. The overview touched on everything from how to navigate the elevators in the Capitol complex to the protocol of testimony, but an observation from the

instructor about worthy causes turned out to be the day’s most lasting takeaway.

“He said, ‘A worthy cause is what everyone comes to Austin with, and their cause is more important to them than anything else,’” Langford said. “In that statement, our legislative reality became clear. As worthy as funding conservation is, other people are asking for money for education, sick children, homebound seniors or other equally compelling causes.”

Langford left knowing he needed an elevator speech, a short, hard-hitting presentation that encapsulated the importance of TWA’s efforts delivered with enough punch to capture attention and prompt action.

“Conservation doesn’t lend itself to oversimplification, so coming up with the right words wasn’t easy,” Langford said.

THE ELEVATOR SPEECH AND ITS IMPACT

The “eureka moment” occurred a couple of months later during the interim between sessions in fall of 1990. Andy Sansom, newly selected executive director of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, was testifying before the Senate Natural Resources Committee.

He was one of many that day. Most speakers, many of whom were from “green groups,” characterized landowners in less than glowing terms because they were equating land stewards like TWA members with sprawl-spreading developers. The rancor fueled by misunderstanding directed at private landowners stymied Langford because the portrayal was just flat wrong. The Capitol’s environment was decidedly hostile.

“Andy finally had his chance at the microphone and I heard him say, ‘There is a difference between landowners—those who give to the land and those who take from the land,’” Langford said. “I knew TWA was made up of givers—and thanks to Andy, I knew how to make our case.”



Photo by David Smith

David K. Langford at TWA’s WildLife 2018 Awards Luncheon giving a brief history of TWA to the throngs in attendance.





Photo by Paul Morse

David K. Langford with President George W. Bush in the Oval Office.

The statement and recognition of how to use it turned out to be pivotal for TWA.

“It embodied what became TWA’s mantra and philosophy,” Langford said. “It gave me an elevator speech that was unique to us—and differentiated the givers from the takers.”

The philosophy inside TWA was evolving too. The organization, like so many, was founded on a single issue. In the mid-80s, white-tailed deer management was just becoming established. The initial group came together to defend newly emerging intensive techniques and tools to manage deer and game populations.

“Originally, TWA existed to talk about big deer and high fences,” Langford said. “As discussions continued around campfires, we recognized our core message should be: well-managed habitat was not only good for deer, but for every other critter—and for Texas and Texans. As Dale Rollins says, ‘We broadened the choke pattern.’”

Even with an expanding choke pattern, TWA’s only friends in Austin were those groups representing production agriculture. The overlap of wildlife habitat and working lands was still slightly foreign to them, so Langford and then-TWA President Steve Lewis started introducing the world of conservation from a hunting and wildlife perspective close to home.

The members of Ag Council, including Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers and Texas Farm Bureau, soon came to understand the common ground. The working relationship

that emerged from those weekly Wednesday “Beans and Cornbread” lunches was TWA’s foundational alliance—and it provided a blueprint for building other alliances that would prove crucial.

As TWA was earning its seat at the Ag Council table, the organization began knocking on the door at the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. It took a lot of knocking before TWA was welcomed inside 4200 Smith School Road.

“TWA certainly had friends within the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, but they were few in number—and nobody was rolling out a welcome mat,” Langford said. “Lee Bass was instrumental in changing that.”

At the time, Bass was a junior member of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission. According to Langford, Bass served, learned and matured into an exceptional chairman who always personally carried the message of private land stewardship to people at the highest levels of state government.

“Over time, people in government and people in non-government organizations, even ‘green-tinged’ ones, began to understand the difference between landowners who give and those who take,” Langford said.

That understanding was a fundamental building block of TWA’s later success.

In the early 1990s, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service attempted to designate a huge swath of Texas as critical habitat for golden-cheeked warblers and black-capped vireos. Private

landowners and landowner groups as well as state leaders and state agencies faced off against the federal government and its large regulatory hammer.

“In protest, I marched on the Capitol with Myrna and our daughter Robin—and thousands of other landowners from across the state,” Langford said.

It was an intense period of time for Texans interested in conservation. According to Langford, Sansom made another statement that changed the dialogue permanently.

“Andy said, ‘If we had all of the money in the state budget every year, we couldn’t buy enough habitat to save all of the birds and animals—and even if we could, those purchases would put the land in government hands and that’s not necessarily the best management,’” said Langford agreeing with the sentiment.

Traditional environmental groups who were genuinely interested in the birds’ wellbeing instead of an agenda began seeing some Texas landowners as allies instead of enemies.

“Mainstream environmentalists began to realize that if they wanted to save the vireos and the warblers in Texas, they were going to need the help of the people who owned and managed the habitat,” Langford said.

Langford often used the example of his extended family to paint a picture of private land stewardship for urban audiences. Like so many families, his cared for the land and improved it with their own efforts and money, all while paying their taxes and contributing to their communities.

“The green groups and urban legislators came to understand that voluntary private land stewardship could be a superior alternative to government ownership,” Langford said. “They learned that the ‘giving’ landowners weren’t looking for rewards for their efforts, but they did need the regulatory disincentives removed, so they could do what was best for the land in their care.”

Eventually, the Texas conservation community including landowners, the agriculture industry and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, came to a workable solution that avoided the mass

designation. It was a shared victory with lasting implications.

“Because we were willing to identify common ground, TWA helped build some bridges that others were able to walk over,” Langford said.

THE BIG FIVE

By establishing the difference in the public’s mind between landowners who give and landowners who take, TWA laid the groundwork for future conservation success.

“If we hadn’t established that private land stewards were givers not takers, we would have never been able to accomplish anything else,” Langford said. “That fundamental shift in understanding allowed us to take some big steps forward on behalf of Texas landowners.”

The passage of Proposition 11 in 1995, which created a special tax valuation for wildlife management, tops his list of significant contributions. When the idea surfaced, TWA’s friends gave it little chance of success.

“From its inception, the purpose of Proposition 11 was always to rest lighter on the land,” Langford said. “No one ever contemplated people getting out of the ranching business, but we wanted to give people the opportunity to cut back on their stocking rates, which in a lot of counties were driven by the ‘intensity test’ of local tax districts, without being penalized.”

By politely telling people to either get on board or stay out of the way, TWA built unlikely coalitions of agriculture and traditional environmental groups. They barnstormed Texas.

“Texas voters passed the measure 62 percent to 38 percent,” Langford said. “With its passage, land stewards could manage to help wildlife and livestock and not be penalized by the tax code. It changed the landscape of Texas.”

Limiting landowner liability is another major accomplishment because it opened gates across Texas.

“Before there was a cap on landowner liability, landowners were afraid to open their land to people outside their families,” Langford said. “The risk was too great.”

Once there was a limit to the potential damages and insurance became readily available to provide additional security, landowners became more willing to share the results of their stewardship with the public.

“Without landowner liability limits, there would be no Conservation Legacy or Texas Youth Hunting Program,” Langford said. “Yellow school buses would have never been allowed inside the gates.”

TWA’s Conservation Legacy programs also earn a spot on Langford’s list of major milestones. Developing and offering conservation education programming to Texans of all ages was a goal from the beginning.

During an interview with Tamara Trail, the person tasked with creating the Texas Wildlife Association Foundation and its attendant education programs in the early 1990s, Langford outlined his vision for conservation education.

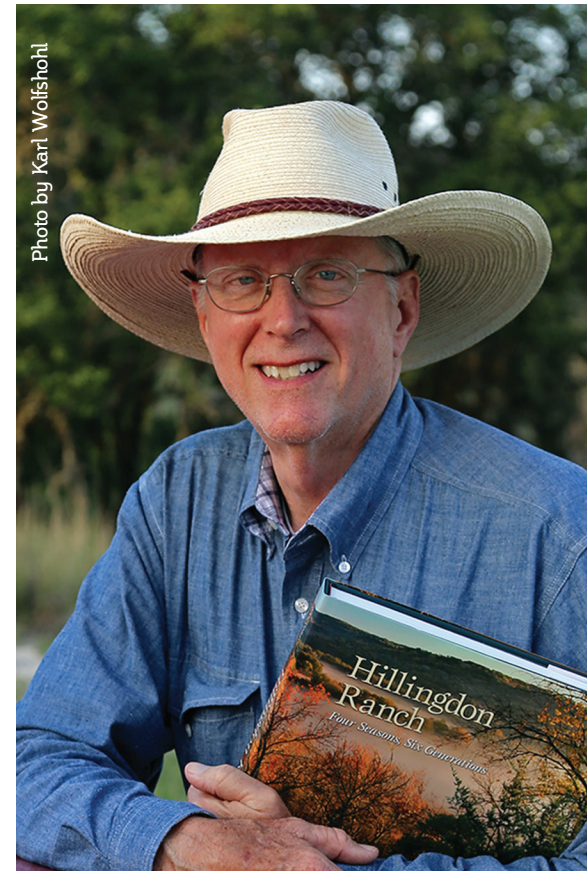


Photo by Karl Wolfshohl

David K. Langford with his Hillingdon Ranch project after retiring from TWA and returning to his photography career.



Photo by David Smith



(L-R), Myrna Langford, David K. Langford and Texas State Photographer Wyman P. Meinzer (David's good friend of over 40 years) The photo was taken during TWA's 2018 Convention at David and Myrna's booth promoting his latest book, *Seasons at Selah*, another compilation of David's marvelous outdoor photography—a passion that David continues to pursue.

"My vision and dream is that sometime in the future the foundation will have a 20-story office building with TWA officed in the basement," Langford said. "Conservation education is where we will establish the need for conservation and from where all of the necessary changes will come."

He continued, "Most of the voting public doesn't know the difference between a cottontail or a pintail or even which one is the duck. Elections will only have favorable results for TWA if the voters fully understand the natural world and land stewards' role in it."

Since 2009, Conservation Legacy programs have reached more than 4 million Texans.

"These are hard touches, not marketing numbers—butts in seats at seminars and boots on the ground at field days," Langford said.

The Texas Youth Hunting Program also rates mention on the top five list of accomplishments.

"Because of liability issues, each child had to be accompanied by a parent or guardian," Langford said. "We quickly learned that the adults didn't know any more about nature than the kids. TYHP has succeeded as a hunting program, as a two-pronged education program and as a national model for getting people engaged in the outdoors."

Since its creation in 1996, TYHP has hosted 3,130 hunts for 17,400 youths and their accompanying adults.

Rounding out the top five accomplishments is TWA's stature at the Legislature and in other seats of power in Austin.

"These days there is not a meeting in Austin about conservation where TWA isn't included," said Langford, noting

that the first time TWA ever requested a meeting at TPWD the agency's leadership hosted it in a broom closet. "We earned our spot at the table using what is best for Texas wildlife and Texas landowners as our litmus test—and by doing what we said we would do. We kept—and continue to keep—our word."

State leaders have come to trust TWA and as result TWA has been able to exert influence on issues where originally the organization had no standing. Water policy is a prime example.

"Our stature with water issues was not contemplated," Langford said. "In fact, originally staff was told to stay out of it."

Then, in 2002, a comprehensive water plan known as SB 2, rose to the top of the state's agenda. Langford came out of retirement to ride point on the issue for TWA. The relationships built earlier made the hard work of common-sense conservation easier.

"Sen. Ken Armbrister, then-chairman of the Senate Natural Resources Committee, used to yell across the Capitol as we passed in the halls, 'Hey Langford, I gave your water speech last night,'" Langford recalled.

Langford apologized for repeating himself to which the senator replied, "We like hearing from you. You come to the microphone, open a vein and bleed all over us. Your heart is behind your words."

TWA made sure that policy makers understood the relationship between the condition of the land and the quality and quantity of the water supply. But no significant language was included in SB 2.

The team wasn't deterred and continued to work for five years until SB 3 emerged in 2007.

"Working together, we were able to codify in state policy the contribution that voluntary land stewardship makes to water quality and quantity," Langford said. "Essentially, state policy says land stewardship benefits all water resources in Texas, and the Texas Code recognizes and fosters that beneficial relationship."

With the passage of SB 3, Langford completely retired, although to this day he remains "on call" to provide back stories, context, history and input when asked.

THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS

While the 21st century brings its own set of challenges for landowners, they are standing on solid ground.

"Today most of the people who understand the difference between the moon and stars also understand the difference between landowners who take from the land and landowners who give," Langford said. "This essential knowledge didn't exist in the public consciousness before the emergence of TWA—and now, with the impact of the TWA Foundation's education efforts, more people understand that conservation in Texas cannot exist without private land stewardship."

He continued, "It is almost unfathomable how far TWA has come from where we started."

Passion and people brought TWA to this point.

"Philosophically you have to believe in the mission and the message or you—and the organization—will not succeed," Langford said.

During his tenure, Langford reminded every search committee of this before they began interviewing candidates for staff or volunteer leaders.

“Obviously, people have to have the skills that meet the criteria for a job, but more importantly they must have a philosophical match or the organization will not move forward,” Langford said. “If people don’t have passion, they will drag the organization down instead of lifting it up.”

Through the years, Langford was surrounded by staff members, volunteers and leaders who believed in TWA with a fervent passion.


“I was the conductor,” Langford said. “I didn’t play the instruments. I pointed the baton.”

He continued, “I had an incredible amount of the right kind of help from people who had the same heart as I did. When I asked for help, regardless of what needed to be done or who needed to

be reached, I was never turned down. Because people believed, they did things within their circles of influence that I would’ve never been able to do.

“Together, we changed Texas for the better.”

His pride in what TWA accomplished in the past is matched by his confidence in what the organization will achieve in the future. With each passing day, the mission becomes more critical.

“TWA is ideally positioned to accomplish great things for conservation at a time when they are more crucial to the state than ever before,” Langford said. “I sleep well at night knowing that failure is no more an option for David Yeates and his talented team than it was for the generations of leaders who came before them. TWA’s future is in good hands.” 

THE DEEP BENCH

In 1985, TWA began with about two dozen founding members, one employee and a frayed shoestring budget. Today, the organization and its sister foundation employ 26 people delivering three main programs including Advocacy, Hunting Heritage and Conservation Legacy on behalf of almost 8,000 members.

“From the beginning, we knew TWA was important, but I’m not sure any of us ever imagined what this organization would become,” Langford said. “I certainly didn’t do it alone. We grew one good idea and one good person at a time.”

He credits part of TWA’s strong foundation to a deep bench of staff talent, who worked alongside him in the formative years.

Charly McTee: “I wouldn’t have come to TWA without Charly. He was a respected outdoor writer who knew everyone in Texas. He managed the office so I could hit the road. As a communicator, he honed our messages—the ones that first caught people’s attention.”

Sharron Jay: “Our original team wasn’t complete until we hired Sharron. We brought her on to answer phones, but she grew into our CFO. When we lost Charly to leukemia, Sharron took over everything that he was doing, including transitioning us to a full-color magazine, and kept a steady hand on the reins. I traveled widely knowing TWA was in good hands.”

Jim Chesnut: “When TWA started, personal computers and cell phones were a new thing. Jim moved us from the technological stone age and got us up to speed on the information superhighway. He was also instrumental in our magazine publishing efforts. He handled design and advertising sales and also provided membership retention advice at a time when every dollar of membership dues was crucial.”

David Brimager: “David, TWA’s longest serving employee, came to TWA as a hunter and wildlife biologist,

who easily took over the Texas Big Game Awards Program—and grew it into what it is today. Along the way, he grew into the trusted right hand of every TWA CEO, handling everything from advertising, convention planning and management and sponsor relations. It’s hard to quantify the contributions of someone who capably rides for the brand every single day.”

Tamara Trail: “With the permission of Don Steinbach who was her supervisor at Texas A&M, we hired Tamara to blaze TWA’s most important trail—conservation education. It wasn’t a little job. We asked her to create programs, build alliances and develop the foundation to fund it all. She was a force to be reckoned with as was Jenny Sanders who lent her talents to this effort a bit later.”

Jerry Warden: “Jerry took Wallace Klusmann’s idea of a youth hunting program and created something that transcended Texas. Our program of education-focused, safe, responsible mentored hunting was so good that it not only opened gates across Texas, but serves a national model for getting youth into the outdoors.”

Lorie Woodward: “You [Lorie] are my writing and testifying partner. Much of my success in Austin and on the back sendero can be attributed to your ability to write what I mean and help me distill my thoughts into their essence. With you and Myrna helping, I couldn’t fail.”

Too Many To Name: “I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: I did nothing alone and would’ve been hamstrung without the committed leadership of every officer and every director who operated within their circles of influence. Volunteers from every walk of life who brought their own expansive networks and limitless passion fueled our success. And, of course, there was every staff member who added their own skills to our powerful mix. It’s been said, ‘You are who you ride with.’ And I’ve ridden with the best.”

