Environmental Law Clinic founder takes helm of NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION

Mark Van Putten, J.D. '82, clinical professor of law and founder/director of the Law School’s Environmental Law Clinic, has become president and chief executive officer of the National Wildlife Federation. Van Putten, who graduated magna cum laude from the Law School, also was NWF’s eastern regional director and taught environmental law at the Law School.

"As a lawyer and as a teacher of environmental law, I value very much the laws and the importance of having strong laws in protecting our environment," he said. Founded at the Law School in 1982, the Environmental Law Clinic gives 10-15 student interns the opportunity to work on cases with attorneys in NWF’s Great Lakes Research Center.

"An excellent symbiotic relationship," says Professor of Law Samuel R. Gross of the cooperation between the Law School and the NWF regional center. Gross, outgoing chairman of the Clinic Advisory Committee, adds, "It has been a great boon to the Law School to have this association." Van Putten, who also taught environmental law, "has been a very valuable member of the faculty." The program "has helped establish our reputation and our standing as a center of environmental law nationally."

"I consider him one of the triumphs of my professional life," former U-M Law Professor Joseph Sax says of Van Putten. Sax, now counselor to U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt and on leave from the University of California-Berkeley’s Boalt Hall law school, taught Van Putten when he attended the Law School and was instrumental in establishing the Law School’s Environmental Law Clinic with Van Putten as director.

"Mark was a wonderful student, very bright and competent. He was very knowledgeable about the Great Lakes area and committed to it. He was interested in doing environmental work, so it was a perfect fit," Sax says. "Once again, Michigan was doing pioneering work" when it became one of the first U.S. Law Schools to establish an environmental law clinic, Sax said. "I was trying to develop an environmental law program at the Law School and to provide students with as much experience as possible. I believed that clinical opportunities were an important part of that. At the time you couldn’t go out in the summer and work with someone and get experience. Environmental law practice just wasn’t that readily available."

Since then, he said, "clinical education associated with law schools has proven its value."

Last year, Van Putten joined with federal and state officials to negotiate a $170 million settlement with owners of a Ludington, MI, power plant to include the value of fish killed by power production in power rates, use those funds to establish a $65 million Great Lakes fishery enhancement trust fund and to install fish protection devices at the plant. Van Putten also led the 10-year drive for development of region-wide standards for pollutants discharged into the Great Lakes and represented the NWF in litigation against the Environmental Protection Agency that led to court-ordered completion of the Great Lakes Water Quality Guidance Standards.

At NWF, he will oversee an annual budget of nearly $100 million and a staff of 400 in the Washington, D.C., area and eight natural resource centers around the country. Founded in 1936, NWF has four million members and 47 state affiliates.

"Today’s conservationists need to move away from a federal focus toward a more on-the-ground, localized and community-oriented effort," said Tom Warren, chairman of the NWF Board. "As the nation’s quintessentially successful leader of a field operation, Mark is the person best-suited to lead us in this new and critically important direction."

Van Putten said he will be pursuing "decentralization without balkanization" in emphasizing NWF’s grassroots strengths. "While looking towards a future that emphasizes community involvement, we will also retain our issues leadership in Washington at a time when everything this country has accomplished to protect the environment in the last twenty-five years is threatened. We will work with reasonable people in both government and the private sector to find new and creative solutions to the problems we all face, but we will also confront and defeat the extremists who would sell or pollute our common heritage."