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## Creature of the coast

*Despite his backwood ways, Wilbur Ternyik is a slick operator in a public-hearing session when it comes to politicking coastal matters*

By **LARRY BACON** of the Register-Guard



Florence councilman Wilbur Ternyik, who rarely strays far from the sea, adorns his home with big-game heads of animals killed in earlier years by hunters far and wide. Staff photo by Paul Petersen

FLORENCE—Decked out in his fringed and beaded buckskin jacket, Wilbur Ternyik looks for all the world like some backwoods beaver trapper.

That he is.

He runs a trap line in the winter. And he can move through the woods with the ease of a deer. But he is no back-country simpleton. Wilbur Ternyik is one of the movers and shakers of the Oregon Coast.

He's a Port of Siuslaw commissioner and a Florence city councilman. He has been perhaps more influential than any other coastal resident in the evolution of the state's land-use standards for the Oregon Coast.

And that's not all.

He is a self-appointed guardian of the rights of the coastal dweller—always ready to do battle with the dark forces from Salem or Washington, D.C., who seek to hurt or destroy the Coastal Way of Life.

More than anything else, Ternyik is a creature of the coast. Ternyik, 53, is dark, wiry, and intense. His hawk-like features are lined from years of living in the wind, rain and blowing sand.

He was born and raised on the Northern Oregon Coast and moved to Florence in the early 1950's. Since he was 16, he worked at stabilizing sand dunes with beach-grass plantings. He got his first training with the Soil Conservation Service in the huge Warrenton dunes stabilization project.

Ternyik's work with the SCS finally brought him here to Florence and the heart of the Oregon Coastal Dunes. In 1955, he went into business for himself growing beach grass and stabilizing sand.

Since then he has gained a reputation as Oregon's expert on sand dunes stabilization. He and his crews have stabilized thousands of acres of sand up and down the coast.

As many as 8 million beach-grass plants a year grown by Ternyik in the local dunes are shipped to other West Coast stabilizers.

Ternyik's expertise has resulted in job offers from South Africa, Pakistan, Argentina and Chile. But he turned them down.

"I didn't want to leave the coast," he explains.

Beach grass isn't the only plant Ternyik knows. During the last four years he has spent most of his time doing research for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the creation of salt- and fresh-water marshes.

Because marshes are such important food-production areas for marine life and other animals, the ability to create marshes could play an important role in repairing damage caused by development on estuaries and other bodies of water.

### Indian heritage

Ternyik is one-sixteenth Clatsop Indian and can trace his ancestry back to Chief Gobway, leader of the Clatsop tribe, which welcomed Lewis and Clark to Oregon. That heritage is important to him; he's said more than once that his Indian ancestors might have done a better job managing Oregon's resources than "you white men."

He likes the coast he knew as a child better than the way it is now. But he says he would never live anywhere else. One of the most miserable periods in Ternyik's life was when he took a job for a brief time in Kansas after he got out the Marine Corps in World War II.

"I damn near died of homesickness before I came back to the coast," Ternyik says.

Though development has changed the coast a lot, Ternyik still finds it a better place than the rest of the world.

“When I go trapping, like this afternoon, in 15 minutes I can be where there isn’t anybody, and probably hasn’t been anybody for a long time,” Ternyik says. “I can be by myself with the coast.”

Even though Ternyik would prefer fewer people and less development, he has long argued that the coast should be a place where residents should be able to make a living.

### Opposes ‘playground’

For that reason, he has fought what he has considered efforts to curtail coastal development to the point that the coast is preserved as a playground for valley residents.

Much of the last 10 years Ternyik has spent fighting what he regards as unjustified attempts by outsiders to make land-use decisions for coastal residents.

He helped organized a committee of elected coastal officials later designated by the Legislature as the Oregon Coastal Conservation and Development Commission (OCCDC). Ternyik headed the group for four years. During that time the OCCDC developed a comprehensive plan for the coast and compiled resource inventories for future coastal planning.

Much of the work done by the OCCDC is reflected in the mandatory coastal land-use goals subsequently adopted by the Land Conservation and Development Commission (LCDC). But Ternyik would have preferred that the Legislature left the responsibility for coastal land-use management to coastal people.

He says that, under OCCDC, Oregon had one of the best coastal-zone management programs in the nation.

“After it was turned over to LCDC, it became one of the worst,” Ternyik says.

Ternyik believes that LCDC has not coordinated the planning among the seven coastal counties.

“Instead of one coastal-zone management program, we have seven of them,” he says, adding that the LCDC staff has been “arrogant” in dealing with the public, that the goals adopted by the agency are too restrictive, and that they are not enforce uniformly.

Local land-use plans that must conform to the statewide and coastal goals will be completed soon, and many officials are feeling relaxed and contented that the planning process is done. But the problems are just beginning, Ternyik says.

He predicts the real fireworks will begin when coastal residents realize how restrictive the plans patterned on LCDC goals will be.

“We have created a heaven on earth for lawyers,” he says.

Ternyik complains that the LCDC still hasn't come up with clear definitions of the coastal goals and how to meet them, a problem that would have been handled better by the elected officials in OCCDC. Now that most local government land-use plans are complete, according to Ternyik, LCDC should be phased out as the Legislature promised when it was created.

### Phaseout unlikely

However, he admits that a phase-out is not likely.

He says the powers-that-be in state government probably won't trust local governments to implement their new land-use plans without keeping LCDC on as a watchdog.

"It's time the State of Oregon recognized that the elected officials around the state are citizens too," Ternyik says.

Ternyik devotes so much time to his governmental activities that some people accuse him of being a compulsive meeting-goer and wonder when he finds time to devote to his business or family.

In addition to being on the council and the port commission, he serves on the Lane Council of Governments Board of Directors and has been active in the numerous committees, advisory groups, and task forces proliferated by state and local government.

Ternyik is also on the board of directors of the Oregon Coastal Zone Management Association (OCZMA), an organization of coastal counties, ports and cities formed after OCCDC disbanded to coordinate coastal land-use planning efforts. For several months last year, Ternyik served as the association's part-time paid director.

### A meeting-goer

He estimates that he attends five to seven meetings a week. When the Legislature is in session, he frequently goes to Salem to testify for himself or the agencies he represents on bills affecting the coast. For years, Ternyik has led the Port of Siuslaw's efforts to get the Siuslaw River jetties extended. He usually makes one or two trips a year to Washington, D.C., to push the project.

What motivates Ternyik?

Some claim he is on an ego trip. Others say he's just a good citizen. At first, Ternyik said he thought he was doing it to make things better for his children. But in retrospect, he says, he's also been after his own personal satisfaction.

"What keeps you going is you win some," he says. "That one time when you can make something happen that you can really feel good about...that's worth all the times you just sit there and listen to boring meetings."

In his “spare” time, Ternyik collects Indian artifacts, guns, and other assorted antiques including mounted big-game heads of animals killed by early-day hunters.

Ternyik also tries to spend some time with his wife and three children. But he admits that his activities have spread him too thin to meet all the responsibilities to his family and the agencies he serves.

Ternyik says his frequent absences have contributed to his wife’s health problems in recent months. That’s why he gave up his job with OCZMA. And if the Siuslaw jetty project is ever approved, he doesn’t plan to seek re-election to the port commission.

He likes people

Ternyik enjoys meeting people and can chat just as easily with marine scientists and planning officials that he meets at conferences as he can with the working men that he meets over coffee at the Oceanaire Café.

But he also alienates people. When he’s angry, he speaks his mind. If some agency or bureaucrat irritates him, Ternyik has no compunction about loosing a verbal barrage during the first public meeting that is convenient.

Because Ternyik’s wrath usually is so quotable, his tirades often end up in print. That doesn’t bother Ternyik, but it simply rubs salt in the wounds of those he attacks.

Some of his most frequent targets are state officials whom he accuses of practicing a “double standard” when it comes to abiding by state regulations. For example, he delights in finding allegedly “illegal fills” by the State Highway Division.

Some conservationists and officials of natural resource agencies consider Ternyik to be pro-development, even through Ternyik claims to be interested in protecting natural resources.

Pro-development?

“I really think he has an appreciation for the outdoors,” says one agency official who has often tangled with Ternyik. “But when it comes down to dollars, jobs, or the economy, he always lands on the side of the developers.”

Others who have tangled with Ternyik still have praise for him and claim that, over-all, he has had a positive effect on coastal land-use decisions. They respect his practical knowledge of the coast and his ability to predict the problems that will arise when attempts are made to actually implement the often-nebulous land-use standards.

One LCDC officials says that Ternyik has been a stabilizing influence among coastal officials who might otherwise have totally resisted some land-use planning work. He believes that, on the scale of conservation to development, Ternyik is close to the middle.

“At times Wilbur is very preservation-oriented,” the official says. “I honestly think Wilbur tends to lean just a hair to the environmental side.”

Even those who admire Ternyik sometimes criticize the way he operates. They say that Ternyik knows the land-use planning process and issues inside out and can pull facts out of his head to overwhelm many coastal officials who might disagree with him. Often he gets the support of other public officials because they know little about the land-use issues and are willing to “let Wilbur handle such things.”

However, one acquaintance says: “At times, he’s fed the flames of controversy and played on the ignorance of coastal officials to swing them around to his viewpoint.”

In addition, his critics say, his confidence in his own knowledge causes him to “shoot from the hip” when he hasn’t done his homework on a particular issue.

“Sometimes, I think he just fires for effect to see what kind of reaction he will get,” one observer says.

Most recently, Ternyik has been criticized over his purchase of some city airport property two years ago. Ternyik brushed aside insinuations that he had profited in the sale through inside information and special treatment resulting from his status as a Florence councilman.

“I would never buy anything again from the city or the port or any other body I serve on because there’s always somebody looking to try to prove that something sneaky is going on,” he said. Ternyik would like to be a member of the Legislature some day. But he was badly beaten in a try for the House District 38 seat in 1976. Lincoln County is the heart of both House District 38 and Senate District 2, and Ternyik believes that living in Florence is a disadvantage for seeking either position.

He used to think about running for Congress. But that was before he made his first trip to Washington to testify on the Siuslaw Jetty project.

He knew for sure then that his home is on the coast. “I couldn’t live back there,” he says.