



Captain Planet:
A Philanthropic Environmental Leader
John R. Seydel
Atlanta, Georgia

Growing up, John R. Seydel loved the environmental cartoon series *Captain Planet*. At the end of every episode, there would be a Planeteer Alert where the diverse team of global heroes would talk directly to the audience about ways to find solutions to the environmental problems in their communities. The Planeteers would end each show with the same uplifting message: *The power is yours!* “It taught us how to be part of the solution, not part of the problem—and to inspire others along the way,” John R. says. “It was really empowering for a young kid like me. I couldn’t wait to get out there in the community and be a Planeteer myself.”

As he grew older, John R. understood that his grandfather, Ted Turner, had cocreated this TV show. “When I was finally old enough to understand just how much he had done, and inspired others to do for the environment, I realized he was a real-life Captain Planet,” he says.

In 1990, during the height of leading his media empire, John R.’s grandfather founded the Turner Foundation to carry on his legacy of environmental advocacy and philanthropy. Ted’s children and grandchildren serve as its board of directors, and his grandchildren make up T3G, the foundation’s junior board of directors; John R. advises on youth engagement, leadership development, environmental stewardship, regenerative agriculture and experiential learning in nature.

As a lifelong animal lover and advocate, one of the organizations that holds a special place in John R.’s life is the Turner Endangered Species Fund (TESF), which honors the Turner Foundation’s motto of “Save Everything.” It uses public-private partnerships to secure land that can be used as an incubator for creating self-sustaining populations of endangered animals, and then expand and reintroduce them to the environment. “My grandfather did this earlier in his life with bringing back the American bison population,” John R. says. “Like I said, he’s a real-life Captain Planet.” TESF is incubating many amazing species, among them the bolson tortoise, the peregrine falcon, the Northern Rocky Mountain gray wolf, the lesser prairie chicken, the Chiricahua leopard frog, the Arctic grayling, the Chupadera springsnail, the gopher tortoise, the Westlope and Rio Grande cutthroat trout, and the black-footed ferret.

The Turner Foundation is one of the most dedicated environmental nonprofits in the world, assisting environmentalists across the U.S. To date it has contributed more than \$400 million to environmental causes and community/movement building. Keeping a strong and engaged community of environmentalists is necessary to drive all of this sustainable action forward. The Turner Foundation works on growing the movement by highlighting efforts in diversity, equity, and inclusion that will involve more vulnerable groups and people, in order to gain their valuable perspectives. It also provides support to educational and immersion programs to encourage youth participation in these crucial issues, which are the primary global issues of their shared future.

John R. has been especially impacted by the women in his family who, like his grandfather, are all fierce environmental advocates. His grandmother, Pat Mitchell, was the first female CEO of PBS, and author of *Becoming A Dangerous Woman*, which advocates for global women’s rights issues. This fighting spirit deeply influenced his mother, Laura Seydel, who has advocated tirelessly for vulnerable environments, people, and youth through her work with the Captain Planet Foundation, the Children & Nature Network, Mothers and Others for Clean Air, Project

Drawdown, Chattahoochee Riverkeeper, the International Union of the Conservation of Nature, the Waterkeeper Alliance, Recycle Across America, and the League of Conservation Voters Education Fund.

John R. has also been greatly inspired by another matriarch of the family, Grandma Jane (Fonda). A lifelong activist, she risked her personal freedom—and was arrested—for standing with the young leaders at a Fire Drill Friday event in Washington DC on October 11, 2019. “She watched these brave youth demanding action from adults and political leaders while building coalitions that said ‘Listen to us. ACT!’” John R. explains. “At the time, she’d been feeling climate anxiety, and then, thanks to youth leaders like Greta Thunberg, her spark was reignited. She became determined to get ‘back on the horse’ so to say, and do everything she can to fight to her last breath for environmental justice, clean energy for all, an inclusive economy, regenerative agriculture—all of it.” Jane was arrested six times and inspired so many other people of all ages including John R.’s sisters, Vasser and Laura Elizabeth, mother, Laura, and even his other “dangerous Grandmother” Pat Mitchell. Reflecting on how it was young people who had inspired her, John R. says, “What these young Planeteers have awakened is truly powerful!”

John R. is honored to now help carry on this amazing legacy by serving on the boards for various environmental organizations, including the Captain Planet Foundation (CPF), which inspired him so as a child. Through the CPF, he has empowered countless youth through a STEM curriculum integrated garden immersion program called Project Learning Gardens that works to awaken that inner Planeteer in future youth leaders. Through the pandemic, while schools were closed, these vacant Learning Gardens were turned into Giving Gardens and, in partnership with the Atlanta Food Bank and Foodwell Alliance, employed local farmers who helped contribute more than 100,000 pounds of food to families in need. Further, CPF’s Project Hero, a free, project-based learning tool engaged young people in quests to help threatened species and ecosystems in their own communities while in-person learning was limited. John R. also enjoys being a mentor for the Ocean Heroes Bootcamp, which trains, empowers, and connects hundreds of young water Planteers from 40 different countries to create campaigns, programs and even policies that fight plastic pollution, conserve precious habitat, and protect endangered species.

Beyond his foundation and nonprofit work, John R. serves in the Mayor’s Office of Resilience as the City of Atlanta’s Director of Sustainability. He is proudly working to combat issues such as food insecurity and climate change, while making Atlanta more affordable, equitable, and resilient. The City of Atlanta has passed the 100% Clean Energy Goal and Clean Energy Atlanta Plan for 2035, and John R. is devoted to attaining this lofty goal while ensuring a just, equitable, and sustainable transition to a clean energy future for all.

Going forward, John R. wants youth to know that there are countless ways for them to get involved in sustainability. “Just get involved, no matter how great or small the contribution is. If you care about an issue, and you know what you are doing is right for your community, tell the doubters what my Grandpa used to tell them: ‘Lead, follow, or get out of the way!’”

Of all the environmental projects the Turner family has supported, perhaps the most historic was Ted’s \$1 billion gift to the United Nations Foundation in 1997. “I think what my grandfather has done, what my grandmothers, mother, sisters, wife, and my really whole family embody, and what I hope to carry on as a legacy is in line with SDG 17, which is to revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development,” John R. says. Global issues like climate change, poverty, and the extinction crises are the unprecedented challenges of our time. It also represents the unprecedented opportunity for global cooperation. Like the Planteers in Captain Planet, who “by our powers combine,” Earth’s real-life Planeteers can work together to transform our energy, transportation, and agriculture economies to be clean, inclusive, and resilient.

“We must work with each other and Mother Nature instead of against one another,” John R says. “There is no other way. I hope I can be a voice of change that helps get us there together.”

I love this planet...I want to see the environment preserved, and I want to see the human race preserved. And I'd like to see everybody living decently in a more equitable, kind-hearted, thoughtful, generous world.

Ted Turner

Call to Action: Looking to become a Planeteer? Check out Captain Planet and the Turner Foundation on Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook.

Reach out to and let him know you read his story here: @JohnRSeydel