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Recipient, 2013 Inamori Ethics Prize

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Yvon Chouinard

Recipient of the 2013 Inamori Ethics Prize

As the founder of Patagonia, Yvon Chouinard is one of the most successful and ethical outdoor industry businessmen alive today. Business journalist Kristall Lutz recently described Chouinard as “THE pioneer in corporate social responsibility.”

Yvon Chouinard was born in Maine in 1938. His father was a French-Canadian handyman, mechanic, and plumber. In 1946, he and his family moved from Maine to Southern California. At age fourteen, he became a member of the Southern California Falconry Club, and it was his investigations of falcon aeries that led him to rock climbing. To make adaptations for the way he was climbing, he decided to create his own reusable climbing hardware. In 1957, he went to a junkyard and purchased the equipment he needed to learn blacksmithing on his own, and eventually started a business producing climbing gear. This entrepreneurial venture sustained him while he climbed and surfed throughout California and the Western United States.

Chouinard became the most articulate advocate of the importance of the style and intention behind an ascent, which has become the basis of modern rock climbing. In 1974, he penned an essay with his then-business partner Tom Frost entitled, “A Word.” In this work they present a challenge: “As we enter this new era of mountaineering, reexamine your motives for climbing. Employ restraint and good judgment. Remember the rock, the other climbers—climb clean.” This philosophy is the foundation of Chouinard’s subsequent leadership.

Over the course of the next thirteen years, through his innovative designs and grassroots efforts, Chouinard’s company, Chouinard Equipment, became the largest supplier of climbing hardware. However, he realized that the use of his products by climbers was detrimental to the environment. In 1972, determined to end this negative impact, and building on his core belief to “climb clean,” Chouinard introduced and patented new aluminum chocks that would not harm the rock. Whereas his best-selling pitons had caused harm to the cracks in the rocks in Yosemite, his new product line did not damage these surfaces. This was the first major business decision he made on behalf of the environment. It revolutionized rock climbing and led to the further success of the company, despite destroying the sales of pitons (formerly his most important and lucrative product).

Chouinard is most noted for creating the clothing and gear company, Patagonia. In 1970, on a trip to Scotland, he purchased sturdy regulation team rugby shirts and resold them with great success to climbers who had formerly climbed in thin thrift-store clothing. From this modest start, Patagonia developed a wide selection of rugged technical clothing. With Chouinard at the helm, Patagonia has been innovative in the quest to protect the environment, even when it hurt the company's bottom line; his goal is to, "create the best quality with the least impact." After realizing the terrible environment impact of the production of standard cotton, Chouinard committed Patagonia to the use of pesticide-free cotton beginning in 1996, thereby creating the organic cotton industry in California. Patagonia continues to lead the way in research and design in their recycled fabric department, and has been a leader for the apparel industry to emulate. Chouinard partnered with other companies (Gap, Nike, Walmart, Levi Strauss, Adidas) to create the Sustainable Apparel Coalition. This group embraces his efforts to set data-driven benchmarks for improving their collective environmental practices. Mary Fox, an executive in charge of Walmart's global sourcing, says, "I adore Yvon. When we went around together to get other companies on board, we code-named ourselves David and Goliath. Because in the realm of sustainability, we were David. Patagonia was Goliath" (*The Wall Street Journal*, 2012).

Recognizing that the financial success of the company provided the opportunity for his employees to achieve personal goals, Chouinard committed the company to fostering employee wellness and being an outstanding place to work. Patagonia has a cafeteria offering mostly healthy, vegetarian fare. The company also provides on-site daycare and flexible work schedules for employees. As Patagonia states, "We have never had to make a 'break' from the traditional corporate structure that makes businesses hidebound and inhibits creativity...we simply made the effort to hold to our own values and traditions." Chouinard's 2005 book, *Let My People Go Surfing*, explores the unique corporate climate at Patagonia. Chouinard is also the author of the 1982 book, *Climbing Ice*, and most recently co-authored *The Responsible Company* with Vincent Stanley (2012).

Chouinard's primary goal is protecting the environment. He gives financial incentives for employees to work on local environmental projects. In 1985, he instituted the Earth Tax, through which Patagonia has committed one percent of sales to grassroots environmental organizations, totaling millions of dollars. Chouinard went on to co-found 1% for the Planet, an organization through which other companies can make their own environmental dona-

tions. In 1989, he co-founded the Conservation Alliance with REI, Kelty, and The North Face. Now the group boasts over 170 member companies who give money to environmental organizations and engage in more work on behalf of the environment. In 1994, Patagonia began hosting “Tools for Grassroots Activists Conferences,” where experienced activists train leaders in the environmental groups Patagonia supports through grants. In 2005, Patagonia built their own power plant out of solar panels that cover the parking lot and provide 10 percent of the power for their headquarters in Ventura, California. The company’s current campaign, “Our Common Waters,” focuses on human water use and related threats to biodiversity. Chouinard and Patagonia continually return the focus to their own impact on the planet, such as reducing their water footprint, and reporting their own water use. In 2009, Chouinard stated, “The reason I am in business is I want to protect what I love. I used to spend 250 days a year sleeping on the ground. I’ve climbed on every continent. I’m old enough to see the destruction.”

Yvon Chouinard began a company while also inspiring a movement. In celebration of his leadership, he earned the prestigious David R. Brower Conservation Award in May 2007 from The Glen Canyon Institute for a lifetime devoted to conservation. The 2011 cover story in *Fortune* magazine on Chouinard declared Patagonia, “The Coolest Company on the Planet,” and *US News* placed him among America’s Best Leaders in 2009. He was also honored in 2007 by the National Forest Foundation for his contributions to the protection of public lands. In 2006, a jury consisting of outdoor and design journalists from leading European trade media awarded him the first Outdoor Celebrity of the Year Award.

In addition to his other accomplishments, Chouinard has made many famous and notable ascents. He currently lives in California with his wife of over forty years, with whom he has two children.