An Evening with Sarah Palin
The Outdoors Enthusiast, Not the Politician

By Dr. Richard Kelley

This week I had a unique opportunity to explore another facet of the global Travel & Tourism industry and, at the same time, get a glimpse of one of today’s most talked-about personalities, Sarah Palin.

The occasion was a fundraising banquet of the Weatherby Foundation International, which immediately preceded the annual meeting of Safari Club International (SCI). Both events were held in Reno, Nevada. Both organizations are dedicated to ethical hunting, preservation and wildlife conservation.

My daughter Bitsy Kelley, an avid hunter and outdoors enthusiast, is a member of the Weatherby Foundation’s board of directors, and I was honored when she invited me to join her on this special occasion.

Former Governor of Alaska and Republican Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin was the keynote speaker at the Weatherby event and captivated the audience.

Since her presentation occurred at almost exactly the same hour that President Barack Obama gave his State of the Union address to the U.S. Congress, I had expected Gov. Palin to give a table-thumping speech slamming massive federal deficits, the size of government, “ObamaCare” and loss of individual freedom.

Not one of those political topics received anything more than the briefest of mentions. Her focus was on sharing tales of her own life experiences – growing up in small towns in Alaska and learning about nature, personal responsibility and family ties through outdoors experiences with her parents and siblings – something she has carried on with her own children.

She also got some chuckles and understanding nods from her audience when she talked about some of the funny and unexpected things that happened while filming the television series Sarah Palin’s Alaska for The Learning Channel.

Listening, I could personally relate to Gov. Palin’s proposition that outdoors activities are a great means of developing family relationships and instilling values in the next generation because I did something very similar with my own children. As they were growing up, we spent many, many days in the fields of all of Hawai‘i’s major islands and later, after I began to spend more time in Colorado, in the Rocky Mountains.

Ethical hunting, the outdoors and wilderness conservation are big business. SCI has approximately 45,000 members in 190 chapters worldwide. During the past three decades SCI alone has raised and spent nearly $300 million promoting ethical hunting and wildlife conservation. Its annual convention, traditionally held in Reno, is usually the largest

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I knew something really important was going on in town as soon as I stepped off my flight and into the Reno terminal. “Welcome Safari Club International” signs and displays were everywhere. The motif continued throughout the lobbies and casinos of the Silver Legacy, headquarters hotel for the meeting.

During my 24 hours in Reno, I had an opportunity to talk with many members of both Weatherby Foundation International and Safari Club International. These men and women are great travelers who go around the world in pursuit of their passion for hunting, the outdoors, and wildlife conservation. This includes Hawai‘i, where hunting is legal on the Big Island, Maui, Lāna‘i, Moloka‘i, O‘ahu, Kaua‘i and Ni‘ihau.

A number of other SCI attendees were from Hawai‘i, had lived there in the past or visit Hawai‘i often. For example, I chatted with retired Marine Corps Lieutenant General Emil R. “Buck” Bedard. He told me how much he and those who served with him at Camp H. M. Smith in Aiea, Hawai‘i, appreciated the warm hospitality they always receive from Outrigger and OHANA hotels and the members of our ‘ohana. He singled out our Military Liaison, Mildred Courtney, for special praise.

The only disappointing thing about my trip to Reno was the fact that, due to the recent shootings in Tucson, security was extremely tight. Gov. Palin’s scheduled exclusive meeting with the Weatherby Foundation board, which I might have had the opportunity to join, was canceled at the last minute.

I had been curious to meet Sarah Palin in person. The way the media describes her, one might think she has the horns of a devil, a pointed tail, long, sharp claws, and a pitchfork.

Is that really true? I guess that I’ll never know!

Yes, Ni‘ihau! Representatives from Ni‘ihau Safaris were at the SCI convention telling attendees of the unique opportunities available to hunt on the “Forbidden Island.” That activity not only produces an economic benefit but also helps control the population of Polynesian pigs introduced by early trans-Pacific voyagers centuries ago, as well as hybrid sheep brought there by ancestors of the Robinson family, which purchased the island in 1864.

Dr. Richard Kelley with General & Mrs. Buck Bedard at Weatherby Foundation event