

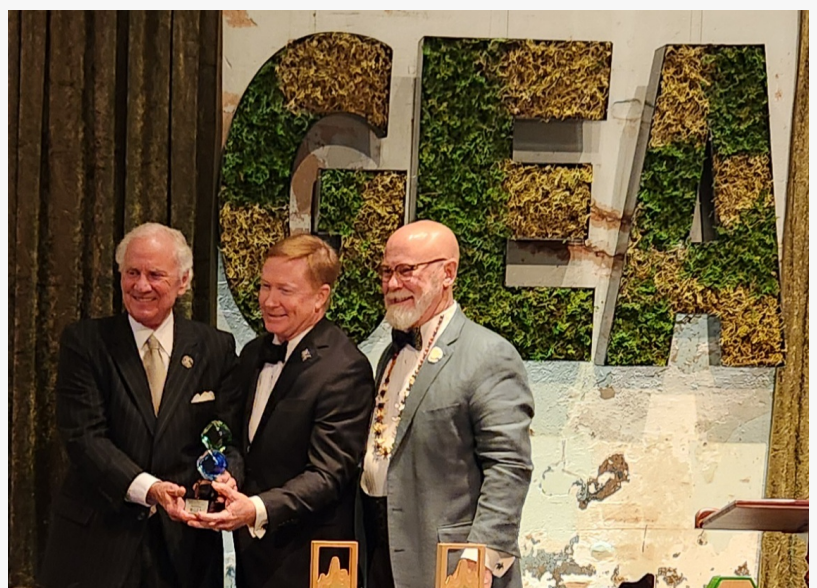
Multiple awards presented during 10th-annual GEA Eco Ball

Governor Henry McMaster praises attendees, says Palmetto State is a paradise

COLUMBIA, SC, UNITED STATES, April 27, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Scores of lofty awards were presented, including an unexpected Order of the Palmetto, S.C.'S highest award, at Global Eco Adventures' (GEA) 10th-annual ECO BALL, held April 22, Earth Day, at historic 701 Whaley in Columbia's also-historic Olympia neighborhood. The black-tie dinner and awards ceremony was attended by hundreds from around the Palmetto State including – among other VIPs – Governor Henry McMaster, S.C. Senate President Thomas Alexander, and Dr. Tom Mullikin, director of the S.C. Department of Natural Resources.

“There is more environmental and conservation spirit, talent, and ability in this room right now than any other place in the entire world,” said Gov. McMaster, moments before presenting William Keller Kissam, president of Dominion Energy South Carolina, with the Order of the Palmetto.

“There’s no more determination, connections, and power than what we see in this room at this very moment.” McMaster added. “We are living in paradise [geographically and environmentally speaking]. We have the ability to ensure that it remains paradise for our children, their children and everyone else’s... and to be an example not only for the rest of the country, but the world.”



S.C. Governor Henry McMaster, former U.S. Congressman Adam Putnam, and SCDNR Director Tom Mullikin during GEA's 10th-annual Eco Ball, April 22, 2026.



The 2026 Global Eco Adventures ECO BALL was held at 701 Whaley Street, Columbia, S.C., on Earth Day.

The evening's awards included the GEA Henry Dargan McMaster Lifetime Achievement Award presented to former U.S. Congressman Adam Putnam, CEO of Ducks Unlimited. Also GEA Legislators of the Year 2026 were named including S.C. Senator Mike Reichenbach and S.C. Representative Shannon Erickson. GEA's 2026 Environmental Champion award was presented to Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Todd B. McCaffrey, secretary of the S.C. Department of Veterans' Affairs. The GEA Educator of the Year 2026 award was presented to Captain Chris Crolley, founder of Coastal Expeditions. And S.C. Representative Bill Hixon was named GEA's 2026 Environmental Leader.

Primarily presenting the awards was Dr. Mullikin – a renowned global expedition leader, retired two-star military officer, and the chairman emeritus of GEA who today directs the statewide SCDNR which employs more than 1,100 technicians, biologists, law enforcement officers, educators, scientists, and administrators. GEA, which Mullikin founded in 2014 (his son Thomas Mullikin Jr. today serves as GEA president), hosted the event.

“One of the most important accomplishments of GEA over the years has been its ability to spawn a groundswell of positive support and responsible environmental stewardship and awareness for the natural world around us, particularly here in the Palmetto State,” said Mullikin. “I echo everything Gov. McMaster said about S.C. being a paradise. It is, and we – my family, friends, and fellow members of Team GEA, Team SC7, and Team SCDNR are committed to protecting, enhancing, and forever preserving this paradise which God has entrusted to us.”

Attending the event was retired USMC Col. Steve Vitali, a veteran of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, who will this year be inducted into the S.C. Military Veterans Hall of Fame.

“What Tom [Mullikin] has done and is doing with the blessing and support of the Governor and so many members of the S.C. General Assembly is nothing short of remarkable,” said Vitali, who served on the Mullikin-led S.C. Floodwater Commission and who has accompanied Mullikin on more than one in-country and overseas expedition. “I’m proud to be part of this growing surge of environmental awareness having nothing to do with politics but everything to do with what’s best for the natural world around us.”

The 2026 Eco Ball comes exactly one week after a S.C. House of Representatives Resolution was introduced and adopted which recognizes and honors GEA, the Mullikin family, and the forthcoming annual SC7 Expedition from the mountains to the sea.

– For more information about SC7, please visit – <https://southcarolina7.com/>

– For more information about GEA, please visit – <https://www.globalecoadventures.org/>

– For more information about SCDNR, please visit – <https://www.dnr.sc.gov/>

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