

# 'One of Us'

## A Defining Experience



Rachel Carson almost did me in. Oh, the death certificate likely would have read lightning strike or drowning, but the truth is that my near demise rests squarely on her shoulders.

On the shores of the Potomac River, 20 miles south of Washington D.C., nature appears most frequently in the form of a well-manicured lawn. Even back in the early 1980s when I was attending high school in Alexandria, Virginia, suburbia had already spread like an invasive weed along the shores of the Potomac.

Seeking respite from the Tudor style split levels, my attention naturally gravitated to the nearby river. From a distance its lazy waters, reflecting pastel-colored sunrises and twilight hues, were a soothing sight. Up close, however, the Potomac showed a different side. Littered with plastic milk jugs and giving off a foul odor on hot, humid summer days, the river was an ugly urban dumping ground. Filled with the righteous indignation of youth, I was outraged on its behalf.

It was at this crucial juncture that Mr. Patrick, whose monotone voice had lulled me through the entire first semester of high school biology, announced the theme of the 1981 Northern Virginia Science Fair: environmental health. My eyes quickly narrowed with purpose. My project

would be the Potomac River. And my role-model in this endeavor would be Rachel Carson.

To be honest, I'd never really read any of Rachel Carson's books. *The Sea Around Us* sat on my bookshelf at home, courtesy of my librarian mother. I'd occasionally flipped through the pictures of breaking waves and fluorescent starfish but I didn't feel particularly motivated to read any text that wasn't subject to a pop quiz. However, I was familiar with Rachel Carson, author of *Silent Spring* and mother of the modern environmental movement. So lacking a consistent net game (my other role model being Martina Navratilova), I vowed to be like Rachel, fighting the scourge of environmental degradation.

With these high-minded thoughts, I trooped off to Sherwood Regional Library to read microfiche. What I learned from squinting at old Washington Post articles was that, thanks to the Clean Water Act and indirectly to Rachel Carson, the Potomac River was actually in better health than it had been in years. It no longer served as a sewer for the nation's capital and, as a result, various fish and bird species were returning to the area. I filled a spiral notebook with quotes and figures then headed home to plan phase two of my science fair project.

This was, of course, the field work. Unlike many of my current Service colleagues, my field experience history is singular and brief. It consists of a single canoe trip across a mile-wide stretch of the Potomac. With a high school friend paddling in the stern, I alternated between fumbling with the water test kit I'd borrowed from Mr. Patrick and dunking a soggy string tied with knots at 10-foot increments to

measure depth. We were almost finished with our first pass across the river when dark clouds starting building in the skies above.

The tension between my scientific principles, which demanded a second series of water tests and depth measurements, and my fear of the impending thunderstorm lasted only as long as it took to find my paddle in the bottom of the boat. By then the wind was beginning to rise and I could hear rumbling in the distance. The bright afternoon turned grayish-green, and heavy raindrops begin to fall. I can't say that, paddling frantically for shore, I felt particularly Rachel Carson-like. I suspect that she would have managed to whip out the eyedropper for a couple more coliform tests on the way home. But upon safely reaching the riverbank, (relieved that I was no longer sitting in a small metal canoe), I enjoyed a returned enthusiasm for my new-found mission.

Looking back after 25 years, I realize that my 10th grade Potomac River science project was a defining experience for me. Perched in that tiny boat with the thunder growing louder, I shed any romantic notions about field work and ultimately opted for the comfort and safety of the law library. In that well-lit, climate-controlled environment, however, the inspiration of Rachel Carson stuck with me. Even a subsequent assortment of relocations and job changes could not squelch her call to do good by the environment. I think we bonded over the lightning. □

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