



Remarks by Linda Despres, NEFSC/NOAA

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50th Anniversary of the Publication of “Silent Spring”

It is very fitting that we are gathered here today at Waterfront Park in the village of Woods Hole to honor Rachel Carson, one of the early women scientists in the federal government, a respected editor and author, and a tireless advocate for the ocean environment.

What motivated Rachel Carson to be a woman who was ahead of her time...a pioneer for women attempting to break into a non-traditional career as well as a witness to the beginnings of the environmental movement?

How did a woman of simple means from Pennsylvania become so involved in promoting the health and well being of fish and fowl and humankind?

All it takes is one step at a time, one story at a time, one book at a time, and a growing groundswell of support where one person can make a difference.

Rachel Carson first arrived in Woods Hole in the summer of 1929 shortly after graduating from Pennsylvania College for Women (now Chatham College), where she began as an English major, intending to be a writer, but liked her science courses and changed her major to biology.

As a summer student and later as a seasonal researcher at the MBL (Marine Biological Laboratory), Rachel Carson worked and collaborated with scientists from the MBL and the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries (a predecessor to NOAA Fisheries Service).

Her early research interests were turtles, but in graduate school at Johns Hopkins University she changed her focus to bony fishes and earned a master's degree in 1932.

Family demands and the death of her father cut short her pursuit of a PhD., and in 1935 she became one of the first two women hired in a non-clerical position with the Bureau of Fisheries as an aquatic biologist, writing radio scripts explaining marine biology and the agency's work to the American public in a series called ““Romance Under the Waters.”

She quickly advanced to Biologist and Chief Editor of Publications for the entire agency by 1949.

All the while she gained knowledge and experience about the marine and terrestrial worlds, writing the “Conservation in Action” series in the 1940s and continuing to write articles for magazines and newspapers.

Although she held a Masters' degree in Zoology, the social mores of that day precluded her from traveling on research vessels and pursuing field studies.

Ms Carson didn't let the traditionally accepted views of women not being able to go to sea (or considered bad luck) to deter her from making an effort to get on a ship so that she could get background material for future fisheries-related publications.

Her first attempt to go aboard the *Albatross III* in 1948 failed when her roommate had to back out at the last minute.

Interestingly, the Chief Scientist wrote in his cruise results that there was "The strong relief expressed by practically all members of the scientific staff when they learned that female observers would definitely not accompany this cruise, might be of some interest.

Their presence in the intimate confined living quarters set aside for scientists without specific provisions for privacy, would have been resented."

Yet Rachel persisted and one year later, she along with Marie Rodell, went aboard the *Albatross III*.

According to Rachel, "No woman had ever been on the *Albatross III*.

Tradition is important in the government, but fortunately, I had conspirators who were willing to help me shatter precedent.

But among my male colleagues who had to sign the papers, the thought of one woman on a ship with some 50 men was unthinkable."

As Dr. Roland Wigley, a Fisheries biologist who was on the cruise with the two ladies later wrote, "In retrospect, I realized it took substantial courage for these ladies to sail aboard the ship because at that time, it was considered 'off limits' for females to ship out on fishing boats or research vessels.

Both deserve our admiration in taking this step in advancing Women's Rights.

And, little did we know that Miss Carson would later produce such powerful writings that they would be heralded around the globe."

Rachel Carson spent nearly two decades working in the federal government, with much of her knowledge, ideas and skills coming from her many and varied experiences and access to information.

In 1952 she resigned from the Fisheries Service, which began as the nation's first conservation and environmental research organization right here in Woods Hole, to pursue her writing career full-time.

It seems appropriate that Rachel Carson would be part of that legacy.

As an aside, even though Ms Carson was the first woman, it took another 15 years before another female federal employee went to sea.

It was a brave step for her, but it was one giant step for womankind.

As we stand here today at the “Edge of the Sea” with the “Sea Around Us,” it is a fitting tribute that her statue will be exposed to “Under the Sea Wind” as she gazes over her salty domain.

The woman we honor walked these same grounds, saw the same islands, breathed the same air, and she made a difference in the world.

May all who see the statue that will eventually be placed here, think about the personal and professional sacrifices that Ms Carson took so that we can hear the call of the osprey, and be thankful to an environmental awareness that might not have happened without this woman’s voice that could not remain silent.

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