

## Rachel Carson (1907-1964)

Rachel Carson aboard a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service vessel in 1949.



### Early influences and education

Rachel Carson spent her childhood in the small rural town of Springdale, Pennsylvania, located northeast of Pittsburgh along the Allegheny River. With her two older siblings, Rachel spent much time exploring forests and streams on her family's 65-acre farm. Even as a young child, Rachel was passionate about the natural world and about her writing. Her words first appeared in print in the children's magazine *St. Nicholas* when she was 10. The year was 1918 and the United States was embroiled in WWI. Her story, entitled "A Battle in the Clouds," was inspired by a letter her brother sent home from his army post about a plane that had been shot. This marked the first of several times Rachel was published in *St. Nicholas*; at school, her writing gained notoriety as well.

Determined to become a writer, Rachel entered the Pennsylvania College for Women (now Chatham College) as an English major. Midway through however, she switched her major to biology and graduated magna cum laude in 1929. A summer fellowship at the U.S. Marine Laboratory in Woods Hole, Massachusetts provided Rachel's first experience with the ocean. Upon graduation from college, Rachel was awarded a scholarship to undertake graduate work in biology at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. For a woman in 1929, this was a tremendous achievement. Rachel completed her master's degree in zoology in 1932. She abandoned pursuit of her doctorate to support her mother and, shortly thereafter, 2 nieces.

### **Accomplishments**

Rachel continued writing, primarily on conservation and nature. Her work was published in newspapers and magazines including the *Baltimore Sun* and its syndicated papers. She advocated early for regulating "the forces of destruction" and for considering the needs of "fish as well as ... the fisherman." Rachel's writing and strong natural science background caught the attention of the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries. In 1935, Rachel was hired part-time to produce a series of 7-minute radio spots on ocean life entitled "Romance Under the Waters." The following year, Rachel outscored all other applicants on a civil service exam and became the second woman employed at a professional level by the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries. She worked for the next 15 years writing brochures and other materials for the public. When she left, she was the Editor-in-Chief of all publications for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Rachel's work for the Bureau of Fisheries often took her to the Chesapeake Bay where she regularly spoke with watermen and toured their facilities in an effort to understand their culture and economics. During WWII, Rachel assisted in naval research on undersea sound, marine life, and bathymetry in an effort to develop better submarine detection capabilities.

These work experiences were fodder for Rachel's first book, *Under the Sea-Wind*, published in 1941. Her gift for distilling scientific terms and concepts for the general public was clear in this as well as her subsequent books. Rachel's second book, *The Sea Around Us*, was published in 1951. *The Sea Around Us* was serialized by the New York Times, spent 81 weeks on its best-seller list, and was eventually translated into 32 languages. The success of this publication prompted Rachel to resign from her position with the Bureau of Fisheries and



pursue writing full-time. She relocated to Southport, Maine in 1953 and two years later, published her third book, *The Edge of the Sea*.

Family issues arose again, and Rachel moved to Silver Spring, Maryland where she adopted a niece's son and cared for her elderly mother.

During this time, Rachel received a letter from a friend in Duxbury, Massachusetts lamenting the loss of bird life after pesticide spraying. This was the seed of inspiration for *Silent Spring*.

Published in 1962, Rachel's last book focused largely on the impact of pesticides on ecosystems and addressed the impact on human health. In this book, she accused chemical companies of spreading disinformation and public officials of accepting this disinformation without question. Chemical companies attempted to discredit Rachel, calling her a communist or a hysterical woman but her work was validated by President John F. Kennedy's Science Advisory Committee. Rachel received medals from the Audubon Society, American Geographic Society, and was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Two years after the publication of *Silent Spring*, Rachel passed away in Silver Spring, Maryland after a long battle with breast cancer. In 1980, she posthumously received the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

### Conservation legacy

Rachel's work with the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries allowed her to witness the dangers of chemical pesticides in the marine realm. With the introduction of DDT in 1945, her concern intensified. Rachel was also very much aware of the controversy within the agricultural community which relied on pesticides to increase production. She had long hoped that someone else would bring the pesticide issue into the public domain but when no one stepped forward, she took it upon herself with the publication of *Silent Spring*. Anticipating controversy upon the release of this book, Rachel collaborated extensively with scientists across the United States and Europe and drew upon results of current research to document the effects of DDT on the environment.

As anticipated, *Silent Spring* ignited a raging controversy. The pesticide industry attempted to discredit Rachel even though she was advocating not for the complete banning of pesticides but rather for research to ensure safer pesticide application and development of alternatives to dangerous chemicals like DDT. *Silent Spring* did propel the federal government to review its current pesticide policy. Rachel was among the witnesses that testified before Congress and as a direct result of the study, DDT was banned.

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* marked the start of the current environmental movement. It served as the wake-up call Americans needed at that time to begin to think about our impact on the environment. As Rachel once stated in a television interview, "man's endeavors to control nature by his powers to alter and to destroy would inevitably evolve into a war against himself, a war he would lose unless he came to terms with nature."

[https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Rachel\\_Carson/about/rachelcarson.html](https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Rachel_Carson/about/rachelcarson.html)

<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/rachel-carson>

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