

Catherine Schmitt: Carson's bond with Maine

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Rachel Carson surely has a place in Maine history, as demonstrated in the Bangor Daily News series "Maine Women in History." But her relationship to Maine deserves at least a few more words than Wednesday's article, "Noted natural, science writer."

Last year marked the 100th anniversary of Carson's birth. Most of the retrospective coverage of her life and works in newspapers and magazines focused on "Silent Spring," "the book that launched the modern environmental movement"; the book that warned of the dangers of pesticides to birds, wildlife and humans; the book that called for safer alternatives and in so doing prompted the wrath of the chemical industry and the reconsideration of federal chemical policies.

Yet Carson's writings before "Silent Spring," some of which were inspired by the coast of Maine, are masterpieces in their own right. Much of Carson's early writings about the sea were accomplished during a long career with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. No one has written about life in the sea and on the coast as eloquently or as accurately as Carson. She was "the sea's biographer."

Carson first came to Maine with her mother in 1946. They rented a cottage in Boothbay Harbor and by all accounts, Carson knew right away that here was a place she could be grounded, and from this place find a way to write about the world. The success of Carson's second book, "The Sea Around Us" — which stayed on The New York Times bestseller list for 86 weeks — allowed Carson to retire from government service in 1952 and spend part of every summer at her cottage on Southport Island, near Boothbay Harbor.

From her home, she watched the tide move across the rocks and ledges strewn with sea life, and found the inspiration for "Edge of the Sea," published in 1955. But she also gave back to Maine. In 1956, Carson urged her fellow midcoast conservationists to consider starting a local chapter of The Nature Conservancy. "Our lives are enriched by understanding the close interrelationship between living things and their environment. This generation must do the job, for natural areas are disappearing fast," she said at the time.

It is hoped Carson would take comfort knowing that The Nature Conservancy has protected more than 1 million acres in Maine, including a salt pond where she went tidepooling, and that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, her former employer, designated 9,000 acres of Maine coast as a National Wildlife Refuge (although, never one for the spotlight, she may not care that they named it after her). Many of Carson's favorite places are now preserved by the Boothbay Region Land Trust.

"Silent Spring," the book that would become a movement, was published in 1962. Carson returned to Maine in the summer of 1963, and she died of cancer later that year. Those looking for Rachel Carson's place in Maine history need only to go to the coast, stand at the edge of the Atlantic and remember her words:

"Like the sea itself, the shore fascinates us who return to it, the place of our dim ancestral beginnings. In the recurrent rhythms of tides and surf and in the varied life of the tide lines there is the obvious attraction of movement and change and beauty. There is also, I am convinced, a deeper fascination born of inner meaning and significance."

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