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Rachel Carson’s Environmental Ethic

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1907-1964, Pennsylvania College for Women (now Chatham University) Class of 1929

The United States Department of Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service created eight panels depicting the life and work of Rachel Carson as part of their celebration of the centennial of her birth in 2007. This collection is on long term loan to Chatham University, her alma mater. The panels are on display around the Shadyside Campus as illustrated in the enclosed campus map.
Rachel Carson was born in Springdale, PA, an industrial town on the bank of the Allegheny River 18 miles from Pittsburgh. Her childhood home remains as a Pennsylvania Historic Landmark and is on the National Register of Historic Places. (See www. rachelcarsonhomestead.org for tours and information about the museum.)

Rachel Carson’s childhood spent roaming the hills and fields around Springdale home was shaped by her mother’s love of nature. As the youngest of three children, Rachel grew up in a family that encouraged and developed her imagination in harmony with the natural world. This panel shows Rachel reading to her dog, and displays some of her early writing as published in St. Nicholas magazine for children. In particular, you can read her essay “My Favorite Recreation” published when she was only 14 years old.

Rachel Carson studied through the tenth grade at the Springdale School Street School, then graduated from Parnassus High School. She was admitted to Pennsylvania College for Women (now Chatham University) in the class of 1929, the only one of her siblings to attend college. The family was financially constrained, and sold property and borrowed funds to support Rachel’s education. The experience at PCW sharpened her interest in nature, and paved the way for her career in nature writing and ecology. She continued her education after graduating from PCW by completing a Master of Science in Zoology at Johns Hopkins University.

Rachel Carson lived in a world of books throughout her life. She wrote about nature, and the forces that drive the great cycles of life connecting the creatures of the sea with the creatures of the land. Her book, Silent Spring, vaulted into immediate success because of her long presence in the world of nature writing, and her large following of readers developed over 15 years. Silent Spring marked a pivotal point in shaping public opinion about the importance of preserving a healthy environment. Her call to action in defense of the natural systems of the world – fresh air, clean water and fertile ground – resonate to this day. Her call for caution in perpetuating the natural world with synthetic chemicals, toxins and biocides, remains relevant, and even more critical today.

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Rachel Carson wrote “The World of Water” first in 1935 when she was 28 years old. It was published by Oxford University Press in 1936. Rachel Carson was a scientist by training, and in the truest sense of the word, a scientist. Her call to action in defense of the natural systems of the world – fresh air, clean water and fertile ground – resonate to this day. Her call for caution in perpetuating the natural world with synthetic chemicals, toxins and biocides, remains relevant, and even more critical today.

Research and Development

Rachel Carson Panel Locations on Chatham University Shadyside Campus

1. Rachel Carson's Childhood

Eddy Theater Lobby

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2. Rachel Carson's Education

Art and Design Center Lobby

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3. Conservation in Action

Dilworth Hall, SSE Conference Room

Rachel Carson worked for the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries, which later became the Fish and Wildlife Service, from 1932 until 1951. She began as a script writer for a series of radio shows, wrote broadly for public education on wildlife and nature subjects finally becoming editor in chief of the Fish and Wildlife Service publications until 1937. She served as a staff biologist from 1938 until 1951, one of the first women to serve as a scientist. Among her publications based on study of the coastal areas suited for National Wildlife Refuges was a series of five Conservation in Action papers describing the habitat and wildlife of the shore. These are available for download at www.fws.gov.

4. Edge of the Sea

Café Rachel

Rachel Carson published three books on the oceans based on her work at the Fish and Wildlife Service. The first, Under the Sea Win’1941 was eclipsed by the outbreak of World War II and did not receive wide public notice. Her second book, The Sea Around Us, brought the mysteries of the ocean to a widely successful book that topped the best seller lists for 18 months in 1941. The conclusion of the Sea Around Us, which was published in 1941, remains a classic book of its kind. It is a popular and informative book for anyone who lives with Rachel and her mother. She returned to Southport Maine, her closest friend and neighbor for many years and in 1990, she received the Eddy Award for her work in marine science.

5. Rachel Carson as Scientist

Anderson Dining Hall

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6. Rachel Carson as Writer

Athletic Fitness Center

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7. Rachel Carson as Conservationist

Library

Rachel Carson is considered an early founder of the modern environmental movement because she spoke out as an advocate for conservation. Her testimony to Congress following the publication of Silent Spring presented an argument for precautionary prevention of exposure of people and wildlife to the toxic chemicals. As DEF. Her willingness to speak and to urge changes in public policy in defense of the natural world rested on her conviction that poisons in the environment would come around to harm people as well as the intended targets of attack. She argued for caution in exposing the public to chemicals, labeling products, and informing people of hazards, as well as for protecting occupationally exposed workers, and asked for more research on the mixtures of synthetic chemicals that are accumulating in the biosphere as the byproducts of human actions. Ten years after her testimony to Congress, the Environmental Protection Agency was formed, the Clean Air Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act, the Toxics Control Act were adopted. Her arguments for precaution remain relevant today.

8. Rachel's Farewell "The Monarch Letter"

Café Rachel

Rachel Carson's letter to her friend Dorothy Freeman shortly before her death is an eloquent summation of the value of life. She talks of the natural cycles of nature, as exemplified in the monarch butterfly's migration, and puts perspective on the span of her life. For one who lived only 56 years, she has left a lasting legacy. She stands as a role model and an inspiration to all who know her story.

This exhibit of panels displaying the life and work of Rachel Carson is presented with special thanks to, Mark Madison, PhD. Historian for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Chronology of Rachel Carson's Life and Work


May 27, 1907


September 1918

First installment of The Edge of the Sea.

October 1925

Published first story in St. Nicholas magazine.

1925-1929

Carson attends Pennsylvania College for Women; majors in science.

1929

Carson goes to Woods Hole, MA to study marine biology.

1930

Begins graduate work in zoology at Johns Hopkins University

May 1932

Graduates with MA in zoology from Hopkins.

1936

Returns to Woods Hole to study at Bureau of Fisheries.

1936


1937

Father, Robert Carson dies.

1938-1952

Appointed Junior Aquatic Biologist with the Bureau of Fisheries, U.S. Department of Commerce; becomes staff biologist with the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

1939

Retires as editor in chief of all USFWS publications.

1937

Publishes a pamphlet in Conservation in Action series for USFWS.

1950

Confirmed breast tumor removed. No further treatment.

1951

The Sea Around Us is excerpted in "Profiles" of The New Yorker. The Sea Around Us published by Harvard University Press. Resigns from government service to write full time.

1952

National Book Award for Non-fiction for The Sea Around Us; Roger Christie, Marjorie’s son born; PhD film version of The Sea Around Us released; Awarded the John Burroughs Medal, April 1952. The Henry Grier Bryant Gold Medal, Geographical Society New York Zoological Society Gold Medal. Awarded a Simon Guggenheim Fellowship for research on tidal life.

1955

The Edge of the Sea published by Houghton Mifflin Co.

July 1956


1957

Rachel adopts Roger Christie after the death of his mother.

April 1960

Carson has radical mastectomy for breast cancer.

June 1962

First of three installments of Silent Spring published as Reporter at Large in The New Yorker; September, Silent Spring published by Houghton Mifflin; December, Silent Spring a book of the month club selection.

January 1963

Albert Schweitzer award from Animal Welfare Institute April 3 CBS Reports airs “The Silent Spring of Rachel Carson.”

June 3, 1963

Carson testifies on the misuse of pesticides; US Senate Subcommittee of Government Operations. 88th Cong. 1st sess.

June 6, 1963

Carson testifies before the US Senate Committee on Commerce; December Awarded the National Audubon Society Medal. Inducted into American Academy of Arts and Letters.

April 14, 1964

Rachel Carson dies in Silver Spring, Md. at age 56.
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### Rachel Carson as Conservationist

Rachel Carson was a scientist by training, and in the truest base of a scientific mind, a disciplined and careful observer of nature. Her work as a scientist was not in the world of academic published research in the traditional sense. Rather, it was in the realm of science applied to public service. Documenting the ecology of the areas that became national wildlife refuges and educating the public about the value of conservation and preservation of the natural world was Rachel Carson’s gift and legacy. Her careful study and thorough understanding of the inter-relatedness of all living things gave credibility and depth to her education materials, and later to her own writing.

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