



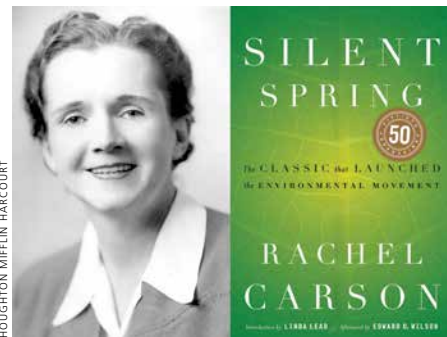
DEBORAH CARR

Inka Milewski

New Brunswick has been well served by two dynamic women working tirelessly for environmental justice

by Deborah Carr

A tale of two women



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT

Silent Spring was published by Houghton Mifflin in September 1962, and is credited for launching the environmental movement.

In 1962, Rachel Carson's seminal book, *Silent Spring*, which explored the links between pesticide use, wildlife mortality, and human cancer, sparked what became a global environmental movement. Educated as a marine biologist, Carson was a reluctant activist compelled by her sense of justice. She wrote to a friend, "Knowing what I do, there would be no future peace for me if I kept silent."

Carson died of cancer just two years following the book's publication. Although subjected to vicious attacks by the chemical industry and policy makers before her death, her conviction and work changed history and inspired generations of environmental voices.

New Brunswick's Dr. Mary Majka and Dr. Inka Milewski are two of those voices.

Mary

On June 14, 2014, a crowd gathered in a rural hall not far from Mary's Point, NB, to celebrate the life and legacy of naturalist, Dr. Mary Majka, who died the previous February at the age of 90.

Mary was a pioneer in the fledgling environmental movement. Although widely-recognized for her 1967-74 children's television show, *Have You Seen?*, and for her life's work protecting fragile habitats like the Mary's

COURTESY OF DONALD AGUON, JR.



Mary Majka



Mary as a guest of Small Talk with Miss Beth, CKCW-TV, circa 1971-72.

Point Shorebird Reserve, Mary also contributed to the first environmental organizations in New Brunswick, advocated for better environmental legislation, and undertook projects to safeguard the cultural and natural heritage of her adopted country.

Her accomplishments are as lengthy as the awards she received (including the Order of Canada and the Order of New Brunswick), but on this day, what lingered in the minds of those present were the ways that her enthusiasm for life had inspired others to action.

Inka

On her farm near the mouth of the Miramichi River, 60-year-old marine biologist Inka Milewski watches for bobolinks and barn swallows above the emerald fields and tidy rows of raspberry bushes. Her own watercolours of birches hang on the walls of the bright and airy home. Their spare, lean lines, striking in black and white and shades of grey, seem apropos of the slender woman seated at the table.

She places her hand upon the stack of reports on coastal habitat destruction and cancer rates in New Brunswick communities that represent much of her recent labours as science advisor with the Conservation Council of New Brunswick. "These are more than reports for me," says Inka. "These are hope. These represent work at a community level after citizens came forward to say there is something wrong. This is citizen science."

She is determined to be a voice for those citizens. And for environmental justice.

Being 'Other'

As the daughter of an affluent Polish high school principal and an Austrian countess, Mary Majka possessed both her father's respect for nature and heritage, and her mother's altruism. Nannies, custom clothes, spa vacations, and summers by the

Baltic sea were the norm, but when Mary was 12, her father committed suicide, plunging the family in financial ruin. During this time, Mary sought solace in nature.

Four years later, Hitler invaded Poland. While her mother and brother fled safely to Austria, Mary spent the war years incarcerated in concentration and work camps, then later as a captive farm labourer in the mountains of Austria. She met her husband Mieczyslaw in a Displaced Person (DP) camp after the war and they immigrated to Canada, landing at Halifax's Pier 21 in 1951.

Like so many others, they carried the invisible scars of war, but also hope and optimism, and a love of wide-open spaces. They travelled by train to the industrial landscape of Hamilton, Ont, where Mary found work as domestic help, learning English from radio and *Reader's Digest*.

She quickly discovered that while DP was a label worthy of pride in post-war Europe, it invited scorn and insults in



Inka addresses a crowd of 2,500 citizens assembled to protest the construction of a toxic waste incinerator in Belledune, New Brunswick. The incinerator was built but never operated.

immigrant-weary Canada. "You had to be strong not to get discouraged," she said. "But in a way, that produced a great resolve to show that I was as good, if not better. Perhaps this is what drove me ... I had been shunned and treated as a second-class citizen, but I determined I would not feel like one."

Inka Milewski's parents had arrived in 1950 as indentured labour. While Halina worked in a school for the deaf, Tadeusz found employment in an Ontario gold mine, then later in the uranium mines at Elliot Lake.

Growing up, Inka also felt the sting of being an 'Other.' She met the taunts of children who could not pronounce her name, or called her "dumb Polack," with defiance. "I thought of myself as the same as everyone else, so didn't understand why they would call us names. I didn't have the language to put to it, but I felt it unfair and unjust."

Her parents advised her to remain silent; to be invisible.



Mary babysitting a harp seal pup, March 1969.

"I didn't like that kind of advice. If something was wrong, I would say so. It was in my nature to challenge authority and arbitrary decisions. And if I was pushed, I would push back."

Dark waters

In 1962, the Majkas moved to New Brunswick, making their home among the thick forests of Caledonia Mountain, not far from the Bay of Fundy.

Having an affinity with water and with mountains, Mary immediately set about exploring the landscape, hunting for mushrooms, clearing trails, gardening, making friends.

"When it was quiet, you had the feeling you were alone ... they called me Mountain Mary or Queen of the Mountain, and I was the queen of my territory," Mary said in later years. For the first time since she was a young child, she found the freedom to pursue her own interests.

But a dark current ran beneath the beauty. She was astonished to discover a garbage dump beside a creek where children swam, locals using shorebird flocks for target practice, and no legal protection for birds of prey. The loss of family during her formative years, and the desecration and deprivation of war, profoundly affected her appreciation for the sanctity of all life. She did not understand this disrespect for forests and field, mountains and meadows, wildlife and wetlands.

And then she read Carson's *Silent Spring*. "That book influenced me more than anything else," Mary said. "I loved nature, but until then didn't realize that I could, as an individual, act in nature's defence."

Inka's own copy of *Silent Spring* is dog-eared and underlined. Like Mary, she also felt drawn to water. She spent her



Inka and Alexandra Morton, a researcher from British Columbia, prepare to examine a farmed salmon infested with sea lice.

summers snorkelling and swimming in Elliot Lake. "I was a child of the Jacques Cousteau era. He brought our attention to the undersea world. It was the mystery, the unknown ... I was hooked," she says. "Some people are afraid of water, but I was never like that."

"I'm not afraid of looking down into dark waters."

In 1977, she graduated with honours in marine biology from the University of Guelph. "I didn't go to university thinking about a career; I just wanted as broad and as deep an education in this field as possible."

Meanwhile, her father was diagnosed with lung cancer. Despite studies linking mining radiation to lung cancer, company doctors refused to consider his disease as work-related. The family spent years pursuing compensation and justice. Their win was an empty one: Halina died of stomach cancer at age of 68, and Tadeusz's lung cancer spread to his brain. He died at 72.

Life's work

Both Mary and Inka understood the value of education. Mary undertook Audubon naturalist training, then organized school field trips, made presentations, led workshops and wildlife tours, initiated the first children's program in a national park, and hosted her own television show, which influenced a generation of young minds. In New Brunswick, her 'Polish-ness' made her unique, drawing people to her.

Inka, in her role as public education director at the Huntsman Marine Laboratory in St. Andrews, expanded the lab's focus beyond university research and opened it to elementary and high schools and the general public. She also launched a major ocean education program within provincial schools. Her efforts earned her international recognition from the National Marine Educator's Association. She still regularly lectures at universities throughout the Maritimes.

Neither woman had a specific goal in mind, yet both followed their curiosity and interests, and pursued the projects that benefited from their skills and inherent nature.

In 1979, the Majkas moved to nearby Mary's Point on the

upper Bay of Fundy, a cove of pristine beauty and a migration stop for an estimated two million shorebirds annually. Mary's work protecting the area gained her so much recognition that many people believe the point was named for her.

Inka and Mary's paths crossed on a number of occasions as both served on the board of directors for the Conservation Council of NB in the 80s

and both have worked on coastal issues. While they respected the other's work and shared the commonality of heritage and Polish language, they operated in different spheres.

"I was probably more of a controversial person," says Inka. "I took a public stance; Mary worked within her milieu, her domain and personality. She shepherded people along. What I was doing did not lend itself to shepherding. It was policy and required a different strategy."

Mary was a natural performer and storyteller, a lover of ritual and ceremony. While scientifically well-informed, she operated from an intuitive understanding of nature's ways gained over a lifetime of observation, immersion and enjoyment. By helping people understand their place in and connection to nature's story, she encouraged a culture of appreciation and stewardship. But she could also be feisty and overbearing in her conviction, which sometimes alienated her from others. She understood the finality and heartbreak of loss and never shied from challenging the status quo or prodding politicians when she felt nature's best interests were compromised.

"If I did not do these things," she once said, "I would not be me."

Inka was scientifically-gearred, a product of a generation discovering the dire repercussions of our broken connection to nature, and government policies that positioned needs of industry over the health of people and environment.

"The work that we all do is built on the shoulders of those who come before us. We are emboldened by the people who forged the way," says Inka. "Whether the issue is environmental, social, health or labour, we question the information the public is fed, seek accountability from public and political officials and demand that wrongs be made right."

Inka's research on human and industrial impacts on wild salmon, oysters, eelgrass, and coastal ecosystems in general led her into community health issues. In 2003, residents of the industrial town of Belledune on the Bay of Chaleur asked her to review an environmental health risk study for a proposed toxic waste incinerator. Astonished by the absence of real science in the document, she began digging. She found decades of government and industry data showing the people of Belledune



Mary embracing the wind and waves at Mary's Point.

DAVID CHRISTIE

were growing food in soil containing lead, cadmium and arsenic, harvesting seafood from contaminated waters, and breathing in toxins. Yet the public had not been informed. In 2006, she published a report on her findings.

"The way in which we are compelled to act is based on our nature which is forged in our childhood experiences," she acknowledges.

Her 'push back' earned her an intimidation lawsuit. She and her husband discussed the implications. He told her, "If you have the facts and what you have to say is true, then we have nothing to worry about." She did not retreat; the suit was later withdrawn and the company that owned the smelter in Belledune cleaned up the contaminated properties.

She shrugs off the word courage. "It isn't courage, I would never use that word. It's the right thing to do. It trumps any other thought or emotion I might have."

Since then, she has turned towards community health, studying New Brunswick's unusually high cancer rates, identifying communities-at-risk and making recommendations to policy makers, and advocating for those seeking justice, although some of her work took her well beyond her comfort zone.

When she reflects upon what she has seen in the past 30 years, she mourns what has been lost and the changes to come. But she still has hope.

"We have overfished and destroyed habitat. When we lose a species—like our wild salmon—we lose a part of ourselves, a sense of ourselves. That is profoundly sad. It affects our well-being culturally and spiritually. This is more than an economic problem.

"Rachel Carson said it best...what we do to nature, we do to ourselves. It has been a generation since her work, and our awareness of this has grown. We can see by climate change demonstrations and [other] protests in the province, that people now recognize the fragility of the planet and our own existence. Unfortunately, that is not shared by the political forces."

Full circle

Two days following Mary Majka's memorial, a small gathering of family and friends stood under dreary skies along the Bay of Fundy shore at Mary's Point. The tide was almost at its apex. They traced a heart of pebbles around a small pile of ashes in the sand and inscribed her name inside.

Then they watched the incoming tide claim the ashes of the woman who had celebrated the intricate web of life. It was fitting that her remains become part of the soil, sand and salt of the land that she adopted, loved and protected. 🐟

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