

Conservationist inspires reverence for wilderness

By: [Frances Beinecke](#)

October 31, 2013 05:07 AM EST

The following essay is part of a series in which dozens of women will reveal what women they most admire. The series is part of “Women Rule,” a unique effort this fall by POLITICO, Google and The Tory Burch Foundation exploring how women are leading change in politics, policy and their communities. See more essays [here](#).

I traveled to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska this summer and got to experience one of the wildest landscapes left on Earth. I saw grizzly bears playing in the grass, wolves tracking caribou and wildflowers blooming in a riot of color. One afternoon, I stepped into a tiny visitor center and saw a tribute to the woman who helped protect the refuge and 100 million acres more of America’s natural heritage: Margaret “Mardy” Murie.

Mardy, who died in 2003, was a force of nature and my conservation heroine and role model. She navigated the male-dominated worlds of frontier Alaska, the oil and gas industry — and Capitol Hill to preserve our wilderness crown jewels. In the process, she became an inspiration to a generation of women entering the environmental arena in the 1970s. She was hailed as the “grandmother of the conservation movement.”

Back then, nearly every environmental leader I knew was male. Then one day, I walked into a meeting and saw a woman with a shock of white hair and a beautiful smile speaking passionately about the need to preserve the Alaskan wilderness for all Americans. I knew within minutes I had found my mentor.

[\(Women Rule video: Who do you admire?\)](#)

Mardy grew up in a cabin in Fairbanks and became the first woman to graduate from the University of Alaska Fairbanks. She married Olaus Murie, a wildlife biologist, and they spent their honeymoon dog sledding up a frozen river in the midst of snow squalls. Mardy said she loved every minute of it.

She and Olaus spent the next several decades traversing Alaska, and she wrote about their adventures in vivid detail. But she did more than describe the landscape she loved; she fought for it. She helped

persuade President Eisenhower to set aside the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in 1960. Then, when oil and gas companies started clamoring to industrialize huge tracts of public land, Mardy advocated tirelessly for the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. She even welcomed members of Congress to her home and served homemade cookies and tea as she tried to persuade them to support the bill.

Shepherding the legislation past a phalanx of special interests was a daunting task amid the Mideast oil crisis. But Mardy's energy was boundless, and she and her fellow conservationists prevailed. President Jimmy Carter signed the law in 1980, protecting an area larger than California and doubling the size of the national park and refuge systems. Years later, President Bill Clinton presented Mardy with the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Mardy succeeded because she could convey the majesty of wilderness to the most hardened Hill staffer or dedicated city dweller. She also maintained clarity about what she was trying to achieve. Her combination of zeal and pragmatism had a major influence on me as I took on more responsibilities in the environmental movement — something she encouraged me and other young women to do in her role as guide and adviser to so many.

We were lucky to find a mentor like Mardy in a time when most environmental initiatives were headed by men. Yet many women have come to the fore since then. Carol Browner ran the Environmental Protection Agency under Clinton. When Lisa Jackson took the position during President Barack Obama's first term, she launched groundbreaking measures to fight climate change, and now clean air champion Gina McCarthy has taken on her mantle. Meanwhile, Jane Lubchenco prioritized the role of science in policymaking when she ran the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and Sally Jewell brings a business background and a strong conservation ethic to her role as secretary of the Department of the Interior.

Women entering the environmental community today have many role models to emulate. I am proud to say the Natural Resources Defense Council has played a role in this shift: We have hired talented young women since we opened our doors, and many now lead our programs and campaigns. The energy sector is one area where women continue to be underrepresented, but NRDC's energy program is run by Dale Bryk and staffed by many women, including Rebecca Stanfield who just received the Energy Department's C3E Women in Clean Energy Award. Meanwhile, I am honored to serve as co-chair of the Climate Action Campaign with Environment America Executive Director Margie Alt, and I am committed to broadening women's roles in energy and climate

policy.

This is one small way I can carry on Mardy's legacy. Whether she was fighting to preserve mountain landscapes in Alaska or inspiring young conservationists on Capitol Hill, Mardy was always thinking about future generations. She dedicated herself to tomorrow's wilderness and tomorrow's leaders. And today, in the visitor center of the refuge she created, you can read her words: "I feel so sure that, if we are big enough to save this bit of loveliness on our Earth, the future citizens of Alaska and of all the world will be deeply grateful. This is a time for a long look ahead."

Frances Beinecke is president of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

© 2013 POLITICO LLC

