

A Climate Adjustment

by Jenny Rough



Beth Walsh

Amid the silence, I balanced on my paddle board and floated through the wetlands of Fishing Creek in Chesapeake Beach, Md. There, in a nature's haven, I spotted red-winged blackbirds, egrets and kingfishers. Saltmarsh cordgrass stretched on for miles, and the water was so calm it reflected the sky's puffy white clouds without a ripple. After six long years, I finally felt at home on the East Coast.

My husband Ron and I moved to Maryland from Santa Monica, Cal., a little over seven years ago. We landed inland—less than an hour's drive from the Chesapeake Bay—in Montgomery County, which, as most of you no doubt know, hugs the northwest end of Washington D.C. Right away, I felt like a misfit. I can't stand politics. The military life doesn't appeal. Museums and monuments aren't my thing. And besides, my heart ached for the Pacific—those ocean views are what drew me to California from my Ohio roots in the first place. Ron was floored that I felt no connection to Washington.

"This is *your* kind of city. Lots of lawyers," he said.

"I left the law to write," I said.

"Linear thinkers," he said.

"I'm not a linear thinker!"

"Yes, you are."

"Fine, I am—but then why all the traffic circles? Linear thinkers like grids." When we first came here, every time I drove somewhere I got lost and cried.

But traffic circles weren't my real nemesis. It was the climate. I had come from a place where I was used to swimming outdoors. In December. In the sunny West, I could meet my friends to hike, run, walk or rollerblade along the ocean bluffs any time, any day—mi-

nus the two weeks in November that amount to California's "rainy season."

Moving to a new city is about finding community, and community is about connection. Where were my people? Where was my place? I had met political pundits, but not power walkers. Finance writers, but not fitness writers. Things finally changed last year when Ron and I vacationed in Florida, and I tried paddle boarding for the first time. Within minutes I was hooked. I loved the sensation of walking on water, but I especially loved the spectacular beauty of Florida's mangroves, unique tropical trees that are concentrated within the swampy wetlands.

Swamps. In grade school, I'd been taught that D.C. (and the surrounding mid-Atlantic region) was built on a swamp. Apparently, the correct topographical term is tidal marsh. Either way, both swamps and marshes fall under the general category of wetlands, and I'd always crinkled my nose at them—weren't wetlands just a tangled mess of mosquito-infested vegetation? After Florida, I admitted I might be wrong, so I headed to the edge of the Chesapeake to explore.

Wetlands are magnificent. With a paddle board, I could immerse myself within them. As I drifted along, the wildlife emerged: bullfrogs, turtles, fiddler crabs, jellyfish. And birds—so many birds! The experience unleashed my inner ornithologist. Wetlands are the connective tissue that links land and sea. The air, soil, sunlight, water, plants and animals are interwoven in a delicate balance. Wetlands purify, detoxify and protect the land from floods. Maryland's wetlands wouldn't

be the same without summer's punishing humidity or the winter snows that replenish water levels.

After the summer I spent observing such a unique ecosystem, my attitude about the region's climate softened considerably. And it was through paddle boarding that I met other outdoor lovers, some of whom were politicians, but many who weren't. Like me, their first thought at the word "preserve" was of a wildlife sanctuary, not of the mobilization effort to protect Social Security. When I found them, I began to find my place.

One day last fall I went paddle boarding along the Potomac River and scanned D.C.'s skyline. It dawned on me that many of the men and women involved in government affairs were making decisions that would impact the vegetation, crustaceans and other creatures—including people—that depended on the wetlands to thrive. Politics still make me cringe, but I want to protect the wetlands that I've come to know and love, so I've begun to take baby steps in the political arena by educating myself on environmental issues with the hope that I can make a difference.

Right now, it's the off-season, and I won't paddle board again until spring. But I can't wait to return to the Chesapeake. Me. Paddle boarding. Birds. Plants and animals. The people of Washington, D.C., the mid-Atlantic, and the world. Like the wetlands, we're all connected in delicate and important ways. 

Jenny Rough writes about health, wellness, and cherishing our connection to nature. Distributed by Bay Journal News Service.