

Envision Clean Rivers: Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and John Cronin

In the 1960s, the Hudson River in New York was little more than an open sewer.

Today, it's one of the richest water bodies on earth, with more fish per acre than any of the major estuaries in the North Atlantic.

Much of this success can be attributed to Robert F. Kennedy jr., one of the nation's top environmentalists who became an environmental attorney with the Waterkeeper Alliance for the Hudson River in 1984, and John Cronin, who became the Riverkeeper for the Hudson in 1983.



Together, they patrolled the waterway in search of polluters, looking for pipes, collecting samples of discharges, keeping notebooks, taking photos and videotapes of abuse and searching agency file cabinets.

To find pipes, they scaled fences, crawled through underground tunnels and trudged through mud.

Sometimes finding pollution meant wearing a wetsuit on a cold night and swimming across a pond to get samples from a pipe. Sometimes the pipes were underneath ancient factories.

From time to time they had to sit in lawn chairs 24 hours a day waiting for pollution to be discharged. To keep people from getting suspicious they would carry a rod and reel.

They pressed charges against approximately 150 polluters, and made them spend more than one-half billion dollars on the Hudson River.

In 1986, Kennedy founded a law clinic at Pace University Law School where 10 students and two professors continuously prosecute polluters on the Hudson Bay -- sometimes 40 at one time.

John Cronin and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. wrote a bestselling book called The Riverkeepers: Two Activists Fight to Reclaim Our Environment as a Basic Human Right about their experiences defending the place where they live. It's a must read for communities who wish to understand what kinds of businesses or agencies are polluting waterways and how it can be stopped.

Today there are more than 150 grassroots Waterkeeper Alliances across the globe.

More about Kennedy and Cronin

Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who prefers to be called Bobby, is now president of the Waterkeepers Alliance, while continuing to be the Hudson Riverkeeper's chief prosecuting attorney. He is also a professor of environmental law at Pace University School of Law, co director of the environmental litigation clinic at Pace University School of Law, a crusading environmental attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council, a public speaker for clean government and co-host of the "Ring of Fire" radio broadcast on Air America Radio.

Somehow Kennedy still finds time to breed hawks, owls, quails, pheasant, and turkeys, while operating a wildlife rehabilitation center that takes in injured animals.

John Cronin is now director of the Pace Academy for the Environment at Pace University in Pleasantville, New York, where he lectures on environmental issues, policy and advocacy. He is also a resident scholar on environmental studies.