

Justice for the Fish

By ReadWorks

Carolyn had grown up smelling of fish all her life. She didn't mind it, even if her friends at school pinched their noses when she walked by, or her teachers kept their distance when they handed her assignments back to her. Her father fished and her grandfather fished. So did her uncles, some aunts, even her grandmother. Even Carolyn could fish. Theirs was a fishing family, and she was proud of it.

They lived by the river, where her family spent the early hours, right around sunrise, fishing. By the time Carolyn went to school, the morning's catch had been delivered to the fish market, where the best restaurants were already waiting to snap up the biggest fish. Carolyn's family took great pride in their fishing abilities and their fishing boats, named after oceans, rivers, and lakes. The Atlantic. The Huron. Her favorite, Erie. Carolyn felt like they caught their best fish when they took Erie out.

But Carolyn began to notice, by the time she got to fifth grade, that her family was catching fewer fish than they used to.

"What's wrong?" she asked her uncle Max.

"It's the water, kid," he said. "It's getting polluted by the sewage being pumped into it."

"Sewage? From where?" Carolyn wondered.

"You see those factories they built a couple of years ago, you see their chimneys in the distance, with all the smoke billowing out of them?" her uncle asked.

Carolyn had noticed them from her classroom windows since the third grade. Those tall grey cylinders jutting into the sky, much taller and bigger—and uglier—than all the rooftops and glass buildings around them.

"Those factories generate a lot of waste, kid. And all the waste ends up in our river."

Carolyn knew the river wasn't theirs, but in her family, they still called it "our" river. Of all the people in their town, they spent the most time on the water, with their nets. And so they had claimed it for themselves.

"What does the waste do?" Carolyn asked.

"What do you think it does, kid?"

"Makes the water dirty? Gets the fish sick?"

"Exactly right," Uncle Max said. "The water gets polluted by all the toxins in the sewage. And the fish, who are supposed to get their nutrients from the water, and eat the plankton and the seaweed in the water, end up eating polluted food, which makes them sick. They aren't living as long, and then we end up pulling out sickly or dying fish each time we cast our nets in there."

This didn't sound good. Carolyn wasn't pleased at all. "What do we do about this, Uncle Max?" she asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine, kid," Uncle Max said. "Ideally, we need to stop the factories from dumping all their waste into the river. They need to send it somewhere else. If all the restaurants in town want to keep serving the tastiest smoked salmon, there needs to be salmon for them to smoke in the first place!"

Carolyn was determined to make things right. Could she go to the factory and talk to someone? Should she write a letter? Carolyn asked her science teacher, Mr. Parker, if he had any ideas. Mr. Parker was her favorite teacher; he never made a joke about how Carolyn smelled when she was in his class. No, Mr. Parker thought that Carolyn was smart and curious. "Two essential ingredients for a stellar scientist," he always said.

"It's complicated, Carolyn," Mr. Parker explained. "It's expensive to set up waste disposal systems for factories as large as these; but you're right, the river is getting ruined because of everything being dumped in there."

Together they wrote a letter to one of the factories, suggesting other ways the factory could get rid of their rubbish. They could filter it first, or collect it in landfills. They could use better materials which created less waste. There were so many ways to treat nature better!

A few months later, the factory wrote back to Carolyn and Mr. Parker. "Thank you for your thoughts," the letter said. "We will do our best to use them, and save your river."

Carolyn was happy to see this. "Our river might be saved after all!" she thought to herself. And there was nothing fishy about that!

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What does Carolyn's family do around sunrise?

2. What problem do Carolyn and her family have?

3. Waste from the factories that ends up in the river is harming the fish in the river. What evidence from the text supports this conclusion?

4. Carolyn is curious. What evidence from the story supports this statement?

5. What is the story mostly about?

6. Read the following texts.

"They lived by the river, where her family spent the early hours, right around sunrise, fishing. By the time Carolyn went to school, the morning's catch had been delivered to the fish market, where the best restaurants were already waiting to snap up the biggest fish."

What does the phrase "snap up" mean?

7. What word or phrase best completes the sentence?

Factories are polluting the river, _____ the fish in it are getting sick and dying.

8. What do Carolyn and Mr. Parker suggest in the letter they write to the factory?

9. What does the letter from the factory say?

10. Why was Carolyn happy to see the letter from the factory? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
