

# THE VANCOUVER SUN

## **A B.C. man's lifelong mission to preserve Earth's rivers: Mark Angelo was the inspiration behind the annual Rivers Day**

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You might have seen the river in a movie or a TV show.

It's the Los Angeles River, encased in concrete with a flat bottom just wide enough for two little boys to ride bikes along. There are no fish in the river. The odd snake, maybe. Car parts. And a whole lot of things you don't want to think about.

Mark Angelo was too young to have seen a wild river. Even so, he knew there was something wrong with this one.

But he loved the flow of water and he began a lifelong love affair with rivers, which has been both a profession and an avocation.

Now 56, Angelo has paddled 600, maybe 700, rivers on six continents. He has no favourite river. Each has a personality of its own that he appreciates for its uniqueness.

But there have been many memorable trips. One of the most memorable was one 20 years ago. He was tossed perilously into the depths of the Zambesi River when a hippo reared up and punctured the bladder of his raft.

Angelo is one of the world's most committed rivers advocates. He has been awarded the Order of Canada and was one of the inaugural recipients of the UN Fresh Water Science, Education and Conservation Awards.

He's not sure where this passion came from. His parents weren't outdoors types. They were movie people.

His mother, Ann Richards, was an actor who did a number of films in the 1930s and early 1940s. Her last movie was one that Edmond Angelo directed. They married soon after, in 1948.

Edmond had been an engineer and a Broadway producer before moving to Hollywood to direct films. But soon after marrying Richards, he returned to his other love, aerospace engineering. He finished his career on the Apollo space team.

"They were amazing people," says Mark Angelo. Among their close friends was Finn Ronne, a great Antarctic explorer who traveled first with Richard Byrd and later led his own expedition to the South Pole.

Ronne used to show up with his stories and his photographs and talk for hours. He died in 1980. Later this year, Angelo is heading to the Antarctic to follow some of the Ronne's footsteps.

Angelo began exploring rivers and streams in the San Bernardino Mountains as he was growing up. That's where he learned to fish and where he determined that he wanted to work outside. Forestry at the University of Montana was the most logical choice.

His first spring in Missoula, Angelo encountered his first real river -- the Blackfoot. You might have seen it in a movie as well. It's the star of *A River Runs Through It*.

He bought a \$50 raft at a drugstore and paddled it dozens of times before he discovered kayaking and other rivers in the the Pacific Northwest. In 1965, he made his first trip to B.C. and the Fraser River with his father.

Angelo was awestruck by the Fraser, the world's most productive salmon river and the province's lifeblood. After several visits, Angelo moved here in 1975 to teach in the fish, wildlife and recreation program at the **B.C. Institute of Technology**. He's still here.

Five years later, Angelo organized a trip: Forty people on five rafts floating down the Thompson River to clean up junk along the way, including a couple of cars he managed to cajole local towing companies into pulling out.

Among the rafters were former B.C. environment minister Stephen Rogers, and Angelo's good friend and renowned adventurer Dan Culver, who died in 1993 on his descent from K2, the world second-highest mountain.

At day's end, Angelo and the others looked at the pile of garbage they had collected. Angelo concluded that it should be an annual event, locally organized to clean up, restore and celebrate rivers. He called the September event B.C. Rivers Day and got the provincial government to officially declare it. Over the years, dozens of communities signed on.

In 1996, Angelo had another life-altering experience on a river.

It was the Biobio River in Chile that flows from the Andes through deep canyons. It is one of the world's great whitewater rivers and Angelo was one of the last people ever to paddle one section of it. Moments after he lifted his raft out of the river, construction workers blasted a hillside into the river, creating a diversion channel for the Pangué dam.

"The very thing that makes it appealing to paddlers -- the steep canyons and fast water - - makes it appealing for dam building," Angelo says.

But socially, environmentally, recreationally, Angelo says nothing about the dam made sense.

"I remember spending a really amazing day with this remarkable Penhuenche Indian activist Maria Panaleo, who said she would not let the graves of her ancestors to be

covered by water. As a paddler, it's a great memory. But it's sad and eerie to think that it no longer exists."

Angelo is not opposed to hydroelectric power. He's opposed to damming and diverting rivers if all of the costs aren't balanced by the economic benefits.

But that moment of watching the hillside slide into a great river convinced Angelo that there needs to be a greater awareness of the role rivers play in our lives.

So in 2003, when the United Nations declared the International Year of Freshwater, "I thought gosh wouldn't it be neat to turn Rivers Day into an international event."

Last year, that happened.

This Sunday, several million people in 36 countries will be cleaning up rivers, picnicking by rivers, listening to music by rivers or simply enjoying the flow of the river as they celebrate World Rivers Day.

More than 75,000 British Columbians will participate in events in more than 100 communities. Several hundred delegates will attend the opening of the first People and Rivers Festival in Togo. In Dominica, 5,000 people will gather at the White River. In West Virginia, 5,000 paddlers will be on the Gauley River.

Thousands of kilometres away from that first concrete-encased river, Angelo will be in Taiwan at the largest World Rivers Day event in Asia. With thousands of others, he'll be on the banks of the Dong Shan marking its dramatic restoration and revitalization.

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