

## A Tribute to Alexandra Dawson

*by Judith Eiseman  
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Everyone who knew Alexandra Dawson seems to agree. She was one of a kind, a force of nature, a giant in the conservation field, a complex character, a socially and politically fearless advocate who button-holed legislators and bureaucrats to seek clarity and action on every important environmental issue of her time. Legions of people who heard her speak, argued with her, worked at her side or simply benefited from her efforts call her fierce, funny, brilliant, indomitable and devoted to careful contemplation—an inspiration to all her admirers and a formidable adversary of those who would misuse the land or the law.



As she entered her 80<sup>th</sup> year, attorney Gregor McGregor toasted her as “the legal brains for the environmental movement here” and added: “Certainly if you have a job in the environmental protection field and especially if you have a company, non-profit, or agency that owes its existence to the tough environmental laws and strong conservation programs here in Massachusetts, you can thank your lucky stars for them, but instead you really should thank Alexandra.”

The law, which she saw as a collection of stories about people and their problems, was the underpinning of her success as an advocate for fair treatment of the earth. Alexandra was relentless in defense of her clients: wetlands, wildlife, the air, the land, the sea and all things living on earth. Like any good lawyer she could have argued the other side. She chose not to.

Her amused and amusing perspective on humanity enriched her teaching, her writing, and her tireless efforts to help others understand what they could do to help make the world a safer, healthier place. In my earlier more naïve days, she patiently explained how I had misinterpreted some public official’s statement by thinking it was truly representing what he would do. She began, “Well my little flower. . .” A friend from Massachusetts Audubon remembers Alexandra’s gleeful satisfaction when she saw the map indicating that endangered turtles had made their homes just where the designers wanted to expand the New Bedford Airport. Not long before Alexandra’s death another colleague sought her advice about how to boil down a huge document on something called “rolling easements” that might help deal with rising sea levels and landowners rights. Alexandra’s response, after listing her experience of the probable behavior of judges, landowners and legislators with respect to easements, was “If you’re looking for a model regulation . . . it is easier to say ‘no one shall riprap a shoreline’ than to deal with a hundred thousand expensive lawyers hired by rich beach owners.”

A few years ago while riding her bicycle, Alexandra was hit by a truck and her wrist was smashed. The paraphernalia that held her bones together while they healed looked like a towel rack. Once it was removed she turned it into a decorative mobile. For years she brought along her quilting and sat

through meetings with pins in her mouth and scissors in her hand, stabbing squares of cloth with a needle and biting thread until she was ready to refute, elucidate or dismiss the opinions of the assembled bureaucrats and special interests. Those pins were distracting and disarming—this was not some little old lady minding her own business in a corner.

She exasperated some colleagues who had shorter term concerns or lacked her objective and comprehensive vision by maintaining her stance—occasionally losing her temper, which she always regretted—when they just wanted to move on to the next item. She was practical about what could be achieved and sought reasonable compromises (if she had to), but above all she was fair in her administration of regulations, creative in her approach to finding and presenting solutions, indefatigable in her pursuit of comprehension of every problem in her path.

She often said of some current topic, “I have been thinking very hard about that,” then delivered her summation. It was because she had been thinking so very hard and so very clearly that she made such a mark in advocacy and policy on national, state, regional, local and intensely personal levels to keep environmental protection high on the agenda.

She was not patient, yet she was tolerant. She was irreverent yet profoundly spiritual in her outlook. She was generous with her time, her research and her talent. She was completely unencumbered by any uncertainty about her goals however much she agonized over the means of achieving them. Whether arguing legal points or admonishing regulators over lax enforcement, quilting a riverine landscape, discussing perspectives on the nature of the unknown, making the case for bylaw passage on town meeting floor, drafting an article, commenting on a proposed project or policy or paddling on a pond—she brought intensity, passion, conviction and purpose to every moment of her life.

Alexandra’s personal style, laced with clever notions and homey examples and her public leadership, lucid writing and deserved influence were honored in her lifetime. She appreciated the accolades and awards even as she was a bit embarrassed by that sort of attention. Fortunately we let her know, as many are never made aware, that her work was appreciated—and it was the work that mattered.

We will come together to remember her, but let her true memorial be our redoubled effort to have good laws enforced and good policy decisions made. Let’s show up at public meetings and hearings to learn what’s going on. Stand up to be counted when folks forget that we depend upon the earth for our survival not just our pleasure and short term profit. Let us advocate for our land, rivers and oceans and the creatures that depend upon them. Let us consider clear-eyed the environmental situation we are in and then insist upon sound comprehensive solutions from our leaders. Alexandra believed in showing up, presenting the facts and then working out reasoned solutions. Do the research, think it through, talk it over and help change the course of “the inevitable.” Informed opinion matters. Think very hard about that. You can be part of her legacy.

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