

## The Hudson Spring

Manhattan is the hub of many activities – finance, theater, art and organized crime, but kayaking? Though Manhattan is hardly kayaking heaven, remember that water defined the city physically, socially and economically for much of its history.

New York Harbor and the Hudson River were once one of the largest maritime port systems in the world. This system was the staging area for much of North America's wealth – whether it was arriving masses of migrants or departing finished goods manufactured by those same migrants. The Statue of Liberty rising through the morning mist that covers the harbor was the first sight for many expatriates of their new country; their first step on American soil was at Ellis Island; their first abodes were in the tenements of the Lower East Side and their first jobs were at the docks surrounding the river. (Rent *The Godfather* and *On the Waterfront* for visuals).

But in the 1950's and 1960's the good times for New York Harbor and the Hudson River ended. First, immigrants began flying to America as air travel became more affordable. Second, and most important, the shipping industry moved towards containerization. Containerization requires open storage space for many large metal boxes. Dense as it is, New York simply doesn't have the space to accommodate thousands of boxes and the trucks that move them. Containerization also doesn't require men to unload the ships – no large longshoremen gangs, just one crane-operator. So the ships and the jobs drifted elsewhere. The communities around the harbor died, the piers rotted and New York turned its back on the water.

For 30 years the waters surrounded Manhattan like a moat. Depending on which side you lived, the moat either hindered the uncultured suburban B&T (Bridge and Tunnel) Crowd from entering the city to party every weekend or it stopped Manhattanites from escaping to spread their dangerous liberal views. And, just as every moat has monsters, the Harbor and the River were used as an extension of New York's waste management system, becoming one of the world's worst toxic sites.

While most simply gave up on the Harbor and the River, a small minority began to fight for the public's right to safely use the waters. The activists battled corporations such as ConEd, Anaconda Wire and Cable Company, and General Electric in landmark environmental campaigns to force them to clean up their waste. The end result was The Clean Water Act of 1977, designed to strictly limit water pollution.

The drift away from the waterfront slowed and reversed by the late 1980's, as The Act began to show tangible results. A more pleasant aquatic environment drew people back and spurred redevelopment on the waterfront. But it was redeveloping with a different character – it was becoming a place of leisure instead of commerce. Chelsea Piers is an example of the transformation. The piers of this complex had once been the final stop for the great trans-Atlantic liners of the Cunard and White Star lines. It was here that the Titanic was to have docked at the end of its maiden voyage in 1912. In 1995 it was rebuilt as a sports facility, with a golf driving range, swimming pool, ice rinks, soccer fields and a gymnastic center.

And naturally one of the first leisure pursuits to blossom in the new atmosphere around the water was kayaking.



For five years the Harbor and the River was my release from the pressures of living in Manhattan. While the majority of those residing in New York City use the green spaces of Central Park as their stress-reliever, I escaped to the blue-brown surface of the water. I spent at least one day a week there – more during the summer - training in six-person outrigger canoes, practicing rolls in kayaks or learning to race surf-skis.

It is not only the physical and psychological relief provided by the training that drew me to the water. It was also the constantly changing theater of the daily events occurring upon it.



Though the waters are in no way as busy as they once were, they are still inhabited by a variety of watercraft. Ferries, barges, cruise-liners, party boats, helicopters, jet-skis, rich men's powerboats and poor men's dinghies all use the Harbor and the River. I have conversed with the captain of the QE2 as tugboats pushed her north up to her berth, played amongst the tall ships of OpSail 2000, viewed the enormous Fourth of July fireworks displays, and been yelled at by ferry captains, Coast Guard Officers and NYPD Officers, all whilst sitting at water level in various types of human-powered watercraft.

The backdrop against which this theater plays is awe-inspiring. On the northern horizon stands the most trafficked bridge in the world – the George Washington. As your eye moves slowly south you see the mid-town towers including the sparkling crown of the Chrysler Building. Anchoring the center of the tapestry is the regal Empire State Building. At the southern end of the island the Financial District rises up. It was here that the World Trade Center Towers stood until recently and they are sadly missed. Finally the Statue of Liberty stands watching the entrance to the harbor on the southern horizon.



Adding to the pleasures of using the waters is watching them recover. All levels of the food chain are re-establishing themselves – everything from simple algae on the piers to fish and sea-lions. This was no more apparent than on my last trip when, for the first time, I saw commercial fishermen hauling blue crabs from the harbor near Liberty Island.

Another encouraging sign is the comeback of the American Mussel. The mussel performed a special role within the ecology of the area before they were decimated by pollution and over-farming. They had been the filtration system for the Harbor and the River, removing much of the silt the river brought down from up-stream. When the mussels died the river became murkier. Now that they are reappearing the waters will start to clear and more aquatic-life will flourish.



Many others will soon be able to enjoy the Manhattan waters of the Hudson River. A new park is currently being built on the west side of the island. Old wooden piers are being torn up and replaced by new piers of concrete, which are being used for events such as movie nights and dance classes. A new running and biking path winds down the foreshore, surrounded by new gardens and sitting areas. Fishermen, joggers, roller-bladers and bicyclers are all discovering the waterside alternative to Central Park. Future plans include a beach with sand and new clubhouses and storage sheds for kayaks and canoes. Soon the Hudson River may resemble Boston's Charles River with all its boating facilities.

The rebirth of the waters around Manhattan is paralleled by other recent events in New York. I left the city in 2002. The city was especially bleak during that winter – and so was life on the water. Due to fears of repeat terrorist attacks, for several months after September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 the Harbor and the River were the most patrolled stretches of water in the world and large areas were designated as no access zones, including the Brooklyn Bridge and the Statue of Liberty. I had guns pointed at me for straying too close to Lady Liberty in a kayak. There was also a dusk to dawn curfew. The use of the river as a pressure release was constrained.

Normalcy eventually returned to the city – but this time with new facilities and more inhabitants of Manhattan are able to appreciate their aquatic assets. New Yorkers are rediscovering their watery roots. And this time there is kayaking.