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Suffering in Silence

The real legacy of Rachel Carson

Katherine Mangu-Ward | April 21, 2007

When the Christian Science Monitor recently declared Al Gore "the Rachel Carson of global warming," the former vice president must have bubbled over with pride. There is, it seems, no higher compliment one can bestow on an environmentalist.

Next month marks what would have been Carson's 100th birthday, and festivities abound. The author of "Silent Spring" -- the 1962 book that birthed modern environmentalism and made "DDT" a dirty word -- Carson is the subject of an exhibit at the National Archives and the star of its Environmental Film Festival this year.

Considered a secular saint by some, she was named one of Time magazine's 100 Most Important People of the Century and is the posthumous recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom. A book due out on Earth Day (when else?), called "Courage for the Earth," is composed entirely of glowing tributes. Front and center is an essay by Mr. Gore, actually a reprint of the introduction he wrote to the 30th-anniversary edition of "Silent Spring." In it he admits that he is a Carson fanboy -- he says that he has a portrait of her hanging in his office and that, "in spirit, Rachel Carson sits in on all the important environmental meetings of [the Clinton] administration."

With all the birthday hullabaloo, now seems as good a time as any for a re-examination of Carson's legacy.

The display at the National Archives focuses on Carson's time as a civil servant at the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries -- a sort of archival "Before They Were Stars" for green groupies. It presents early evidence, as the exhibit has it, of her "gift for turning dry scientific writing into prose easily understood by lay readers." Carson, a marine biologist by training, retired from government service after a trio of books on the sea brought her a decent income and modest literary stardom.

Her next project, "Silent Spring," did rather more -- it changed the world. In it, she wrote: "As crude a weapon as the cave man's club, the chemical barrage has been hurled against the fabric of life," causing, among other horrors, "spring...unheralded by the return of birds." The book decried insecticides like DDT as destroyers of ecosystems and threats to human health.

The following year, CBS aired the hour-long special that brought her anti-pesticide manifesto to a wider audience, "The Silent Spring of Rachel Carson." CBS received more than 1,000 letters of protest and lost at least two major sponsors -- chemical companies feared the public's panicked response to Carson's claims. Until last month, the television program was moldering in the National Archives' vaults.

At the time of the controversy, DDT was used widely as an insecticide on U.S. farms. Since World War II, it had also proved remarkably effective at controlling insect-borne diseases, but Carson



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essentially ignored that fact; so have her successors.

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Some of Carson's star anecdotes about DDT's carcinogenic qualities turned out to be flawed: Her tale of "acute leukemia" by October seems absurd to the modern reader, as does the man who winds up hemiplegic in the hospital. "Severe depression of the bone marrow" just "a short time" after spraying for roaches. Neither cancer could have been caused by DDT in so short a time.

Workers of the World... What?

On strike in Paris, Northern Ireland, Cincinnati... and Abu Dhabi (11/2) Partly as a result of Carson's work, the U.S. banned DDT in 1972, around the same time as most of the developed world. In 2001, the Stockholm Convention, a global treaty, banned DDT as part of a "dirty dozen" of agricultural chemicals.

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The convention contains a tightly circumscribed exception for continued public health use, but even that exception almost didn't make it into the final document. Greenpeace, the World Wildlife Fund and more than 300 other environmental groups fought it. In recent years, many such groups tried to get a complete ban on all DDT uses by 2007 -- in time for Carson's birthday.

What's After? How Would It Be Done?

The World Health Organization now estimates that malaria kills between 300 and 500 million cases of malaria annually, causing approximately one million deaths. About 80% of those are young children, millions of whom could have been saved over the years with the regular application of DDT to their environments.

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Carson cannot be blamed directly for these deaths. She didn't urge total bans in "Silent Spring." Instead, she finally had the home-pushing-in-court Mordredging DDT as an anti-malarial agent, she writes, "Practical advice should be 'Spray as little as you possibly can'." One man's traitor Scott Stantis (12/7)

Teaser Freezer Burn

In the National Archives exhibit, Carson is described as "a passionate voice for protecting the environment and human health." Her concerns about the effects of insecticide on bird populations were well-founded. But threats to human health were central to her argument, and Carson was wrong about that. Despite decades of persistent exposure in many populations over several decades, there is no decisive evidence that DDT causes cancer in people, and it is unforgivable that she overlooked the insecticide boom of DDT for malaria control in her own time.

The DDT Dilemma

Are big chains to blame, or is excessive regulation? Radley Balko (12/5) In the years before it lost the public's support in the mid-1960s, the Global Malaria Programme wiped out malaria in the American South, several Latin American countries, Taiwan, the Balkans, much of the Caribbean, sections of northern Africa and much of Australasia. Exposés like Carson's made the global campaign's methods increasingly unpopular and eventually brought to a halt the effort to end malaria on a global scale. The disease has since bounced back in many developing countries. In the mid-'90s, the only South American country that continued to use DDT, Ecuador, was also the only country to experience a significant decline in malaria. Many countries, like Uganda, remain hesitant to use DDT because European nations have threatened to refuse their agricultural exports if they do.

"It's a paradox that right now we are using pesticides at a greater rate than when 'Silent Spring' was published," Diana Post, executive director of an environmental nonprofit called the Rachel Carson Council, told the Washington Post. Paradoxically, widespread use of DDT for malaria control would likely result in fewer pounds of insecticide being released, not more, since countries struggling with malaria are now using much larger quantities of less potent alternatives. Spraying houses in the whole country of Guyana required the same amount of DDT once used on a single cotton field in a single growing season.

Carson didn't have the benefit of more than 40 years of additional data, but her successors do. DDT remains the cheapest and most powerful tool for stopping malaria. When sprayed on interior walls, it has virtually zero interaction with wild ecosystems. Yet when the topic of relaxing restrictions in order to save millions of lives comes up, someone inevitably brandishes a copy of "Silent Spring" and opposition is silenced so completely that you could hear a mosquito buzzing in the next room.

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*Katherine Mangu-Ward is an associate editor for **reason**. This article originally appeared **in**
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