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Rachel Carson's Dire Unintended Consequences

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Courage for the Earth: Writers, Scientists and Activists Celebrate the Life and Writings of Rachel Carson
 edited by Peter Matthiessen
 Houghton Mifflin, 2007, 224 pages, \$14.95, ISBN 0618872760

One of the most difficult aspects of keeping up with environmental issues is having to suffer through the agonizing hero worship at the altar of Rachel Carson.

Were I a more religious person, I would be inclined to believe she made a pact with the devil in which she received the capacity to write beautiful prose poetry in exchange for leading society down a path to Hell paved with the proverbial "good intentions."

Misguided Admiration

It is mind-boggling to find such incredibly misguided admiration for a woman whose opposition to DDT and other synthetic pesticides led to the suffering and death of millions of people around the world. In this book the usual suspects and their friends in the left-leaning environmental activist world spew forth a soupy goo of grandiosity that could boil the contents of any healthy stomach.

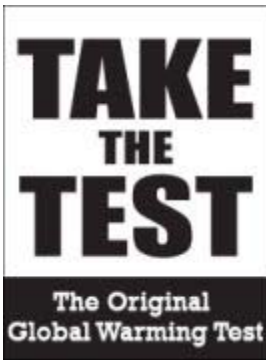
Rachel Carson was a nice, well-meaning lady with rudimentary training in zoology who stumbled into the role of a writer for the government agencies who first employed her.

She turned out to be so good at it that she incrementally left scientific reasoning behind. When she decided to attack the chemical inputs into our environment, she sought counsel in all the wrong places, kicking off an environmental firestorm that had a horrendously negative cost-benefit ratio measured in human lives.

The editor of *Courage for the Earth*, Peter Matthiessen, expresses her good intentions as follows: "She intended to make certain that if the public continued to let itself be led by politicians who stood by and permitted the looting of world resources and the pollution of the land, air, and water that our children must inherit, it would not be because we knew no better."

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Secondary Concern

A true window into her thinking can be found in a beautiful paragraph in her 1941 book *Under the Sea-Wind*:

"To stand at the edge of the sea, to sense the ebb and flow of the tides, to feel the breath of a mist moving over a great salt marsh, to watch the flight of shorebirds that have swept up and down the surf lines of the continents for untold thousands of years, to see the running of the old eels and the young shad to the sea, is to have knowledge of things that are as nearly eternal as any earthly life can be. These things were before man ever stood on the shore of the ocean and looked out upon it with wonder; they continue year in, year out, throughout the centuries and ages, while man's kingdoms rise and fall."

The final phrase clearly shows that Rachel Carson cared greatly for nature's wildlife and little, if at all, for mankind.

Factual Shortcomings

Although the sea was her obsession, Carson wrote beautifully on other subjects, from the threat of nuclear technology and the first signs of global warming to animal rights and the importance of introducing nature to young children. In combining her writing with a career in science, she had what she once called "the magic combination of factual knowledge and deeply felt emotional response."

If only this were so, an estimated 50 million people who have since died of malaria might be alive today.

Harvard's E.O. Wilson claims in *Courage for the Earth* that Carson's *Silent Spring* resulted in the passage of the Endangered Species Act in 1973, which led to the recovery of the American alligator, gray whale, bald eagle, peregrine falcon, and the eastern population of the brown pelican. All of those claims have been proven false by the late G. Gordon Edwards.

Among the most egregious claims in the book are those supplied by Al Gore, such as the following: "*Silent Spring* came as a cry in the wilderness, a deeply felt, thoroughly researched and brilliantly written argument that changed the course of history." Without this book, Gore writes, "the environmental movement might have been long delayed or never have developed at all."

Gore goes on to claim, "Carson brought two decisive strengths to this battle: a scrupulous respect for the truth and a remarkable degree of personal courage. She checked and rechecked every paragraph in *Silent Spring*."

Unfortunately, it appears she was checking only the grammar, not the scientific reality, of which she was sadly misinformed.

New Activism

Silent Spring planted the seeds of a new activism that has grown into one of the great popular forces of all time--but not one from which mankind has benefitted on the whole. The costs have outweighed the benefits by many orders of magnitude.

Carson's biographer, Linda Lear, tells us in *Courage for the Earth* that those who saw Rachel Carson "as just another contemporary prophet of doom, not only miss the triumphal arc of her journey, but the seamlessness of her vision. In her brief life, Carson moved from unbounded wonder to deep despair at the potential outcome of human domination of the natural world." She certainly did her part to thwart that domination.

If you were to draw a thread through the many leftist contributors to this book, you could use as a needle a salient comment made by author Freeman House, who asserts, "It's comforting to a writer such as myself to think that a single book can alter the course of the future."

House considers *Silent Spring* one of these. He goes on to say that before its publication in the 1960s, "I sometimes found myself saying 'What we need is a new Karl Marx.'"

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Well, enough. I have suffered through this book so that you will not need to.

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