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Drowning Out Real Science

Just over 100 years ago, on May 27th, 1907, Rachel Carson was born. Her book "Silent Spring," published in 1962, is considered by many to have launched the modern environmental movement.

Just yesterday, in the New York Times, John Tierney wrote a column entitled "Fateful Voice of a Generation Still Drowns Out Real Science," referring to Rachel Carson and the impact of her book.

Tierney writes "the chemophobia inspired by Ms. Carson's book has been harmful in various ways. The obsession with eliminating minute risks from synthetic chemicals has wasted vast sums of money: environmental experts complain that the billions spent cleaning up Superfund sites would be better spent on more serious dangers."

We have opined on DDT in particular, and chemophobia in general, in two feature stories, "Bring Back DDT," and "Chemophobia," written by EcoWorld science correspondent Dr. Edward Wheeler.

The larger challenge worth examining on the centenary of Rachel Carson's birth is that rational scientific inquiry is no match for emotional rhetoric. This comes as no surprise, of course, but the degree to which emotional rhetoric is overtaking issues where economics and environmental concerns intersect is becoming all-inclusive.

To the uninitiated, all of these points to ponder are mere nuances compared to the compelling emotional appeals that are, unfortunately, parroted unrelentingly by nearly every media pundit, public school teacher and politician in America.

For these reasons, Rachel Carson's legacy is mixed. Her powerful, emotional prose continues to captivate and inspire generations of concerned citizens. But policies based on emotional arguments are ripe for exploitation, and often entirely removed from what a rational environmentalist might really want.

Ed Ring posted this entry on Wednesday, June 6th, 2007 at 4:24 pm and is filed under Civilization. You can follow any responses to this entry through the RSS 2.0 feed.

7 Responses to "Drowning Out Real Science"

1. Keith Schneider Says: June 7th, 2007 at 1:24 pm

On the day late last month that Rachel Carson would have turned 100 years old I posted a piece on Mode Shift that focused on the surprising failure of the nation's major environmental organizations to defend the mother of modern environmentalism.

In any case on Tuesday this week John Tierney, an influential free market science writer and columnist at the New York Times, leveled a broadside at Carson in the pages of Science Times. Calling Silent Spring a "hodgepodge of science and junk science," Tierney accused Carson of using "dubious statistics and anecdotes (like the improbable story of a woman who instantly developed cancer after spraying her basement with DDT) to warn of a cancer epidemic that never came to pass."

I know Tierney and worked with him at the Times in the early 1990s, when he joined the paper. He's smart, thorough, and delights in being a contrarian on environmental issues. He wrote a famous piece questioning the value of recycling, essentially saying that recycling wastes more energy and materials than it saves.

Now Tierney is after Rachel Carson, using as the basis of his critique a 1962 review of Silent Spring in the journal Science written by I. L. Baldwin, a professor of agricultural bacteriology at the University of Wisconsin.

See more at www.modeshift.org

2. Mel Visser Says: June 7th, 2007 at 1:58 pm

Rachel Carson's 100th birthday remembrance certainly brought out a diversity of viewpoints. Was she a visionary who eliminated toxic chemicals from America's environment, or was she a crack pot whose radical actions are responsible for millions of malarial deaths?

I hope that the next centennial anniversary of her birthday will put her accomplishments into proper perspective. In a day in which any chemical that could be safely manufactured and used was approved, she pointed out environmental and human health problems of persistent organic pollutants (POPs) ... chemicals designed to kill ... occurring beyond their manufacture and use points.

The use of PCB, DDT, toxaphene, chlordane, heptachlor, Lindane, Aldrin, Dieldrin, hexachlorocyclohexane and hexachlorobenzene were banned in the developed countries because they were suspected of causing cancer or were acutely toxic in the environment.

As these bans were pursued in developing countries, argument focused upon malarial vector (mosquito) control. Why? The real battle should have been the use of DDT in general agriculture. When developing countries banned agricultural DDT, what did they use to control pests? Toxaphene! Banning DDT on grains only, and overseeing its 'discriminate' use for mosquito control would have avoided the spread

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of DDT in dangerous quantities and controlled mosquitoes. The DDT ban fight became a smokescreen for the use of all the other POPs!

Now toxaphene, probably the most used pesticide on the planet, circulates through the air from its uses in developing countries and pollutes cold, clear waters from the northern Great Lakes to the Arctic. Lake Superior, a lake the size of the state of Maine with depths going to below sea level. Its waters, if spilled over the continental United States would cover the area to a depth of six feet and is frightfully polluted with foreign toxaphene. Its trout harbor 5 parts per million of toxaphene, ten times the level that would classify them as hazardous waste!

Arctic polar bear and killer whales are on the edge of survival or decimated by banned pesticides and PCBs. PCBs and pesticides circulate through our air in hundreds of millions of molecules per breathful quantities, amounts that are now being connected to asthma, diabetes and cancer. Inuit ingest 15X a tolerable quantity of poisons.

Rachel Carson was on the right track. Unfortunately, her work is not complete and the planet is still at risk. See the web site www.coldclearanddeadly.com for more details.

Melvin J. Visser
 Kalamazoo, MI

- 3. [Ed Ring](#) Says: [June 7th, 2007 at 5:39 pm](#)

Keith: You make some very good points. It is important when criticizing the environmental movement to recognize the vital contributions they have made. I would not want to imagine a world where environmentalists never arose to counter the damage caused by the industrial revolution. But do you think there is ever a downside to environmentalism when it emphasizes emotion over reason? My point is that balance between emotion and reason is necessary when advocating or setting environmental policy - for the sake of the environment!

The current race to destroy our planet's last tropical rainforests in the name of anti-petroleum biofuel plantations is an environmental catastrophe. One that should be challenged for reasons both emotional and rational.

- 4. [J.D. Lees](#) Says: [June 8th, 2007 at 10:01 am](#)

When Melvin Visser (above) writes: "Arctic polar bear and killer whales are on the edge of survival or decimated by banned pesticides" it destroys his credibility. Polar bear numbers are not in decline; most populations under observation are increasing. A statement like Visser's leaves the impression he is either regurgitating environmentalist rhetoric or deliberately spreading misinformation. Either way, it undermines the credibility of the rest of his message.

- 5. [ed wheeler](#) Says: [June 9th, 2007 at 5:33 pm](#)

Keith Schneider: You make a reasoned reply to Tierney's article, but you are dead wrong about pesticides causing cancer. There is no real world scientific evidence that the levels of pesticides present in the environment has increased any human's cancer risk. You are just echoing conventional media junk science. Google Bruce Ames or even me (read "Chmophobia" in Ecoworld archives)! If you are an inbred rat who is fed doses of pesticides a million times higher than any human would ever be exposed to in his lifetime, you will have more tumors after two years of such exposure than control rats. So what, it has nothing to do with normal human exposures. There is NO cancer epidemic "out there" after 60 or 70 years of use of pesticides on our crops and use of preservatives in our foods. Check out SEER.gov.

- 6. [Melvin J. Visser](#) Says: [June 10th, 2007 at 4:38 pm](#)

I too thought that the polar bear demise was hype. However, in looking into serious research on Svalbard Island, the levels of toxics in polar bears was reducing their life span and reproductivity. Throughout the Arctic, population is increasing through careful conservation and harvesting quotas.

- 7. [current science articles](#) Says: [September 24th, 2007 at 4:12 pm](#)

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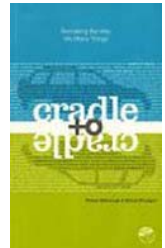
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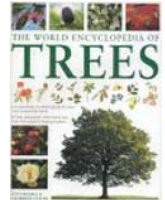


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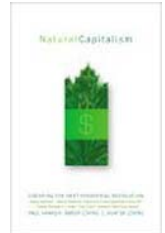
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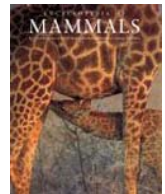
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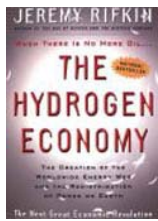


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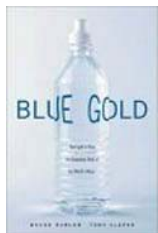


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