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[What's New](#)

[Archives](#)

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[CounterSpin](#)

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Extra! **September/ October 2007**

Rachel Carson, Mass Murderer?

The creation of an anti-environmental myth

By [Aaron Swartz](#)

Sometimes you find mass murderers in the most unlikely places. Take Rachel Carson. She was, by all accounts, a mild-mannered writer for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—hardly a sociopath's breeding ground. And yet, according to many in the media, Carson has more blood on her hands than Hitler.

The problems started in the 1940s, when Carson left the Service to begin writing full-time. In 1962, she published a series of articles in the **New Yorker**, resulting in the book *Silent Spring*—widely credited with launching the modern environmental movement. The book discussed how pesticides and pollutants moved up the food chain, threatening the ecosystems for many animals, especially birds. Without them, it warned, we might face the title's silent spring.

Farmers used vast quantities of DDT to protect their crops against insects—80 million pounds were sprayed in 1959 alone—but from there it quickly climbed up the food chain. Bald eagles, eating fish that had concentrated DDT in their tissues, headed toward extinction. Humans, likewise accumulating DDT in our systems, appeared to get cancer as a result. Mothers passed the chemical on to their children through breast milk. *Silent Spring* drew attention to these concerns and, in 1972, the resulting movement succeeded in getting DDT banned in the U.S.—a ban that later spread to other nations.

And that, according to Carson's critics, is where the trouble started. DDT had been sprayed heavily on houses in developing countries to protect against malaria-carrying mosquitoes. Without it, malaria rates in developing countries skyrocketed. Over 1 million people die from it each year.

To the critics, the solution seems simple: Forget Carson's emotional arguments about dead birds and start spraying DDT again so we can save human lives.

Worse than Hitler?

"What the World Needs Now Is DDT" asserted the headline of a lengthy feature in the **New York Times Magazine** (4/11/04). "No one concerned about the environmental damage of DDT set out to kill African children," reporter Tina Rosenberg generously allowed. Nonethe-less, "*Silent Spring* is now killing African children because of its persistence in the public mind."

It's a common theme—echoed by two more articles in the **Times** by the same author (3/29/06, 10/5/06), and by **Times** columnists Nicholas Kristof (3/12/05) and John



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Tierney (6/05/07). The same refrain appears in a **Washington Post** op-ed by columnist Sebastian Mallaby, gleefully headlined “Look Who’s Ignoring Science Now” (10/09/05). And again in the **Baltimore Sun** (“Ms. Carson’s views [came] at a cost of many thousands of lives worldwide”—5/27/07), **New York Sun** (“millions of Africans died . . . thanks to Rachel Carson’s junk science classic”—4/21/06), the Hill (“millions die on the altar of politically correct ideologies”—11/02/05), San Francisco Examiner (“Carson was wrong, and millions of people continue to pay the price”—5/28/07) and **Wall Street Journal** (“environmental controls were more important than the lives of human beings”—2/21/07).

Even novelists have gotten in on the game. “Banning DDT killed more people than Hitler, Ted,” explains a character in Michael Crichton’s 2004 bestseller, *State of Fear* (p. 487). “[DDT] was so safe you could eat it.” That fictional comment not only inspired a column on the same theme in Australia’s **Sydney Morning Herald** (6/18/05), it led Senator James Inhofe (R-Ok.) to invite Crichton and Dr. Donald R. Roberts, a longtime pro-DDT activist, to testify before the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works.

But other attacks only seem like fiction. A web page on junkscience.com features a live Malaria Death Clock next to a photo of Rachel Carson, holding her responsible for more deaths than malaria has caused in total. (“DDT allows [Africans to] climb out of the poverty/subsistence hole in which ‘caring greens’ apparently wish to keep them trapped,” it helpfully explains.) And a new website from the Competitive Enterprise Institute, RachelWasWrong.org, features photos of deceased African children along the side of every page.

Developing resistance

At one level, these articles send a comforting message to the developed world: Saving African children is easy. We don’t need to build large aid programs or fund major health initiatives, let alone develop Third-World infrastructure or think about larger issues of fairness. No, to save African lives from malaria, we just need to put our wallets away and work to stop the evil environmentalists.

Unfortunately, it’s not so easy.

For one thing, there is no global DDT ban. DDT is indeed banned in the U.S., but malaria isn’t exactly a pressing issue here. If it ever were, the ban contains an exception for matters of public health. Meanwhile, it’s perfectly legal—and indeed, used—in many other countries: 10 out of the 17 African nations that currently conduct indoor spraying use DDT (**New York Times**, 9/16/06).

DDT use has decreased enormously, but not because of a ban. The real reason is simple, although not one conservatives are particularly fond of: evolution. Mosquito populations rapidly develop resistance to DDT, creating enzymes to detoxify it, modifying their nervous systems to avoid its effects, and avoiding areas where DDT is sprayed — and recent research finds that that resistance continues to spread even after DDT spraying has stopped, lowering the effectiveness not only of DDT but also other pesticides (**Current Biology**, 8/9/05).

“No responsible person contends that insect-borne disease should be ignored,” Carson wrote in *Silent Spring*. “The question that has now urgently presented itself is whether it is either wise or responsible to attack the problem by methods that are rapidly making it worse. . . . Resistance to insecticides by mosquitoes . . . has surged upwards at an astounding rate.”

Unfortunately, her words were ignored. Africa didn’t cut back on pesticides because,

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through a system called the “Industry Cooperative Program,” the pesticide companies themselves got to participate in the United Nations agency that provided advice on pest control. Not surprisingly, it continued to recommend significant pesticide usage. When *Silent Spring* came out in 1962, it seemed as if this strategy was working. To take the most extreme case, Sri Lanka counted only 17 cases of malaria in 1963. But by 1969, things had once again gotten out of hand: 537,700 cases were counted. Naturally, the rise had many causes: Political and financial pressure led to cutbacks on spraying, stockpiles of supplies had been used up, low rainfall and high temperatures encouraged mosquitoes, a backlog of diagnostic tests to detect malaria was processed and testing standards became more stringent. But even with renewed effort, the problem did not go away.

Records uncovered by entomologist Andrew Spielman hint at why (*Mosquito*, p. 177). For years, Sri Lanka had run test programs to verify DDT’s effectiveness at killing mosquitoes. But halfway through the program, their standards were dramatically lowered. “Though the reason was not recorded,” Spielman writes, “it was obvious that some mosquitoes were developing resistance and the change was made to justify continued spraying.”

But further spraying led only to further resistance, and the problem became much harder to control. DDT use was scaled back and other pesticides were introduced—more cautiously this time—but the epidemic was never again brought under control, with the deadly legacy that continues to this day.

Instead of apologizing, the chemical companies went on the attack. They funded front groups and think tanks to claim the epidemic started because countries “stopped” using their products. In their version of the story, environmentalists forced Africans to stop using DDT, causing the increase in malaria. “It’s like a hit-and-run driver who, instead of admitting responsibility for the accident, frames the person who tried to prevent the accident,” complains Tim Lambert, whose weblog, *Deltoid*, tracks the DDT myth and other scientific misinformation in the media.

Front and center

Perhaps the most vocal group spreading this story is Africa Fighting Malaria (AFM). Founded in 2000 by Roger Bate, an economist at various right-wing think tanks, AFM has run a major PR campaign to push the pro-DDT story, publishing scores of op-eds and appearing in dozens of articles each year. Bate and his partner Richard Tren even published a book laying out their alternate history of DDT: *When Politics Kills: Malaria and the DDT Story*.

A funding pitch uncovered by blogger Eli Rabbett shows Bate’s thinking when he first started the project. “The environmental movement has been successful in most of its campaigns as it has been ‘politically correct,’” he explained (*Tobacco Archives*, 09/98). What the anti-environmental movement needs is something with “the correct blend of political correctness (. . . oppressed blacks) and arguments (eco-imperialism [is] undermining their future).” That something, Bate proposed, was DDT.

In an interview, Bate said that his motivation had changed after years of working on the issue of malaria. “I think my position has mellowed, perhaps with age,” he told **Extra!**. “[I have] gone from being probably historically anti-environmental to being very much pro—combating malaria now.” He pointed to the work he’d done making sure money to fight malaria was spent properly, including a study he co-authored in the respected medical journal the **Lancet** (7/15/06) on dishonest accounting at the World Bank. He insisted that he wasn’t simply pro-DDT, but instead was willing to support whatever the evidence showed worked. And he flatly denied that AFM had ever received money from tobacco, pharmaceutical or chemical companies.

Still, AFM has very much followed the plan Bate laid out in his original funding pitch to corporations: First, create “the intellectual arguments to make our case,” then “disseminate these arguments to people in [developing countries]” who can make convincing spokespeople, and then “promote these arguments . . . in the West.” The penultimate page gives another hint that stopping malaria isn’t the primary goal: “Is the DDT problem still relevant?” is listed as an “intellectual issue to be resolved”—once they got funding. (When asked for comment on this, Bate became upset and changed the subject.)

Bate continues to insist that resistance isn’t much of an issue, because its primary effect is to keep mosquitoes away from DDT-covered areas altogether. Instead he claims “resistance was a useful device by which it was easy to pull the plug” on an anti-malaria campaign that was failing because of administrative incompetence. “You’re not likely to see an aid agency [admit this],” he said when asked for evidence. “I’m not sure what you want me to say. If you read enough of the literature, you get that strong impression.” But few experts aside from those affiliated with AFM seem to have gotten the same impression.

DDT’s dangers

These myths can have serious consequences. For one thing, despite what is claimed by the right, DDT itself is quite harmful. Studies have suggested that prenatal exposure to DDT leads to significant decreases in mental and physical functioning among young children, with the problems becoming more severe when the exposure is more serious (American **Journal** of Epidemiology, 9/12/06; Pediatrics, 7/1/06), while the EPA classifies it as a probable human carcinogen.

For another, resistance is deadly. Not only has DDT’s overuse made it ineffective, but, as noted, it has led mosquitoes to evolve “cross-resistance”: resistance not only to DDT but also to other insecticides, including those with less dangerous environmental effects.

And perhaps most importantly, the pro-DDT line is a vast distraction. There are numerous other techniques for dealing with malaria: alternative insecticides, bed nets and a combination of drugs called artemisinin-based combination therapy, or ACT. ACT actually kills the malaria parasite fast, allowing the patient a quick recovery, and has a success rate of 95 percent (World Health Organization, 2001). Rollouts of ACT in other countries have slashed malaria rates by 80 to 97 percent (**Washington Monthly**, 7/06).

But such techniques require money and wealthy nations are hesitant to give it, especially when they think they can just avoid the whole problem by unbanning DDT. “DDT has become a fetish,” says Allan Schapira, a former senior member of the malaria team at the World Health Organization (**Washington Monthly**, 7/06). “You have people advocating DDT as if it’s the only insecticide that works against malaria, as if DDT would solve all problems, which is obviously absolutely unrealistic.”

As a result, senators and their staff insist that DDT is all that’s necessary. And the new director of WHO’s malaria program, Arata Kochi, kicked off his tenure by telling the malaria team that they were “stupid” and issuing an announcement that “forcefully endorsed wider use of the insecticide DDT” while a representative of the Bush administration stood by his side. Half his staff resigned in response (**New York Times**, 9/16/06).

There are genuine issues with current malaria control programs: incompetent administration, misuse of funds, outdated techniques, a lack of funding and concern. And, much to their credit, many on the right have drawn attention to these problems.

Africa Fighting Malaria has frequently called for more effective monitoring, and conservative Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Ok.) has used his influence to fight corruption in anti-malaria programs.

But the same Tom Coburn recently held up a bill honoring the 100th anniversary of Rachel Carson's birth on the grounds that "millions of people . . . died because governments bought into Carson's junk science claims about DDT" (Raw Story, 5/22/07). Even AFM's Bate was quoted as finding this a bit too much, pointing out that Carson died in 1964, just two years after *Silent Spring* was published (**Washington Post**, 5/23/07). But apparently getting a few digs in at the environmental movement is just too hard for conservatives to resist.

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