People & Profiles

The Power of One

Rachel Carson was already a best-selling author and government scientist before she wrote Silent Spring, a book that literally changed the course of history. Throughout the controversy that followed the book's 1962 publication, she remained modest about her intent, overcoming many personal tragedies. "The beauty of the living world I was trying to save has always been uppermost in my mind."

In the 1960's, DDT was the world's most powerful pesticide. It had proved its worth during World War II, killing malaria-bearing insects in the South Pacific. Most wartime pesticides only killed one or two species of insects. DDT killed hundreds of types of bugs at one time. The compound's inventor won a Nobel Prize.

Although she rarely used the term, Rachel Carson's earlier books expressed what many now call an ecological view of nature. Her writings explained the complex, interdependent web of life of which humans are an integral part.

When Rachel Carson learned that DDT was being tested for civilian use near her Maryland home, she proposed an article about the pesticide to Reader's Digest. Her concept was rejected. When she next pursued the idea of writing about DDT, thirteen years had passed and the publishers she wrote to were still not interested in her proposal. She had, however, collected massive scientific data about this deadly chemical – enough to fill a book.

It took her four years to complete the book. When the New Yorker serialized it, a firestorm of public fear and industry outrage erupted. In one rare interview, she was asked, "Miss Carson, what do you eat?" She replied, "Chlorinated hydrocarbons, like everyone else."

Silent Spring described in detail how DDT enters the food chain and accumulates in the fatty tissue of animals and humans. Carson explained how the presence of this and other toxins causes cancer and genetic damage. She concluded that DDT and other pesticides had poisoned the world's food chain. Some of the latest scientific research shows that her findings were, if anything, understated.

EPA was created in 1970 and DDT was the first pesticide the agency banned. This ban led to one of the most dramatic natural recoveries of the 20th century.

When the bald eagle was named our national bird in 1872, more than half a million eagles soared through the skies of North America. By 1963, only 417 breeding pairs remained, due, in part, to the widespread use of DDT.
With DDT banned in 1972 and the Endangered Species Act (jointly administered by EPA and the Department of Interior) a year later, the birds made a dramatic recovery. President Clinton celebrated this progress on July 2, 1999, saying that the bald eagle is "now back from the brink, thriving in virtually every state of the union." He proposed removing the bird from the Endangered Species Act listing.

Of Carson's *Silent Spring*, one magazine said, "The book that her efforts resulted in was about the spraying and what it did to the birds and other creatures. But that does not begin to describe its scope or account for its impact. One might just as well say that Darwin wrote about the turtles and the Pacific Islands where they were found."

Rachel Carson died from cancer two years after *Silent Spring* was published.

**Links:**
- Information about the history of EPA, DDT and the recovery of bird species
- EPA Endangered Species Protection Program (ESPP)
- EPA and Bird Conservation

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