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## Silent Spring and its Noisy impact

By Emily Dorr

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Developed in 1939, DDT was first utilized in WWII as a means to control mosquito population on the islands of the South Pacific where American soldiers were first deployed. Due to its success overseas and its use in treating other ailments such as typhus, lice, and the black death, it was commercialized and earned huge profits in the United States. However, as with any other new technology, especially those involved in the hard sciences, there were certain aftereffects that were beginning to pop up in ways that baffled both chemical corporations and scientists alike. It was these aftereffects that worried Rachel Carson as she observed and began researching the negative effects DDT was having on the environment and, in turn, humans. She documented her work in a book she wrote titled *Silent Spring*, which was a radical and revolutionary publication at the time because it exposed the irresponsibility of the chemical corporations in its use of the pesticide. The publishing of *Silent Spring* is best known for fostering the Environmental movement, but it also established a need for federal involvement in environmental safeguarding, it rekindled awareness in public health, and is still used as a precedent today as we face current challenges regarding the environment.

The first half of The Environmental Movement's focus: wilderness conservation, ecology and biodiversity, was overshadowed by World War I, The Great Depression and eventually World War II. While environmental heroes like J.N. Darling, Robert Marshall, and Aldo Leopold did their part in educating the public, lobbying for change, and founding numerous conservation

groups, they slowly realized “that not everyone can or wants to become a wilderness explorer.”<sup>1</sup> However, there was widespread progress in the environmental movement through the establishment of what was called “nature writing” or stories based in prose, philosophy, and perspective of their ecologist authors.<sup>2</sup> Nature writing created a source of public interest about the relationship between humans and their environment. Following this period of wilderness conservation, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* emerged and defined the rest of the movement as for the first time the public was taught about the dangers of the two-way relationship between the environment and humanity.

Published in 1962, *Silent Spring* was introduced to a public that was worlds away from the “nature loving” early preservationist writers of the beginning of the century. Our world had developed, and industry was booming from WWII as well as the commercialization of the pesticide DDT, sparking the “Green Revolution”. *Silent Spring* differed from its previous nature writings because it shed light on the havoc the insecticide was reeking on the animal populations of every biosphere as well as exposing the misuse of the pesticide by chemical industries. This book single-handedly took on chemical industries to inform the public that “synthetic pesticides such as DDT linger in animal tissue and in soil and water, poisoning not just the pests at which they are aimed but also many other creatures and, ultimately the environment itself.”<sup>3</sup> This sounded the alarm for other threats to the human environment and captured the attention of the public not due to an awe of nature’s beauty as earlier in the century, but a fear of its threat. *Silent Spring* also started a conversation about the responsibility of the government to invest and care

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<sup>1</sup> Steffoff, “The American Environmental Movement,” 44

<sup>2</sup> Steffoff, 47

<sup>3</sup> Steffoff, 53

for the environment which began with the Kennedy Administration and the creation of the President's Science Advisory Committee (PSAC) in 1963.

Within two months of the Committee launching, the Clean Air Act of 1963 was passed, creating a pathway for other legislation aimed at protecting our environment. President Kennedy was a huge fan of Carson's work and even had personal copies of her first two publications. In fact, "Silent Spring served Kennedy's goal of saving wetland habitats along the Atlantic coast and having the U.S. government regulate the toxic pesticide sprays beloved by huge agricultural concerns."<sup>4</sup> *Silent Spring* began an unprecedented inclusion and say of women in the President's administration and set in motion a new standard for women in science and politics all over the world. *Silent Spring* also directly influenced the Environmental work of the Nixon Administration, as it was cited as one of the sources used in the National Environmental Policy Act which was passed in 1969. Nixon went further to establish the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1970 and on April 22nd of the same year Senator Gaylord Nelson (who was familiar with Carson's work) held the first "Earth Day."<sup>5</sup>

*Silent Spring* renewed interest in public health and awareness not only within the government but also for the American people. For *Silent Spring's* "arguments were not about scenic landscapes that only a small percentage of Americans would ever see; they were about people's health, and the health of their children."<sup>6</sup> Carson's work revealed what many chemical companies did not want to admit; DDT was not discriminating against who or what it poisoned, and there was nothing the corporations could do about it. Unfortunately, due to the amount of money that was being pumped into the media by these corporations, much of the general public

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<sup>4</sup> Brinkley, "Rachel Carson and JFK, an Environmental Tag Team" *Audubon Magazine*

<sup>5</sup> Burke, "From the archives: Scientists conversations about Rachel Carson and DDT, 1944 to Today" *American Scientist*

<sup>6</sup> Steffoff, "The American Environmental Movement," 50

did not believe what Carson was saying and praised DDT because it was a new convenience to farmers who could put food on the table faster than ever. They were right, DDT did help farmers to yield more crops in a shorter amount of time, and it also opened the gateway for preservatives and freeze-dried packaging as convenience was selling. *Silent Spring* proved that DDT wasn't even as effective in its original purpose to treat malaria, as in "75 cases they [the government] examined, the researchers found that mosquito and malaria control programs failed 49 percent of the time for lack of funding."<sup>7</sup> In fact, it was even more unsuccessful as time went on and people began to notice a spike in death tolls amongst birds, fish, and cattle; people were starting to get sick and no one could figure out why. *Silent Spring* revealed the connection to DDT and so began the education of the public of what was really happening.

This book, once called the most influential book since *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, highlighted the negative effect of long-term exposure to DDT, or "dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane" and the public was noticing. Americans were documenting unprecedented numbers in high blood pressure, Alzheimer's disease, rare cancers, reproductive disorders and breast cancer. In fact, "the research suggests that DDT affects breast cancer as an endocrine disruptor, that the period of time between first exposure and cancer risk seems to be around 40 years – and that other endocrine -disrupting chemicals could potentially simulate this kind of risk pattern."<sup>8</sup> This means that if your mother or grandmother had exposure to DDT, the cancer could carry through generations and effect you today. This crisis of the late 60's and early 70's came about as Americans went to get routine blood tests, which is how many people found out they had cancer. The public was finally paying attention and *Silent Spring* was the reason as it educated the

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<sup>7</sup> Conniff, "Rachel Carson's critics keep on, but she told the truth about DDT" *Yale Environment*360.

<sup>8</sup> Preidt, "Breast Cancer and DDT: Exposure Timing May Matter" *WebMD*

public, provided scientific evidence and reasoning for what was happening, and served as a warning that if something wasn't done or if we continued to ignore the warning signs we would be in big trouble.

*Silent Spring* is still seen as one of the most influential books of its time, if not the most influential nature "writing" of the early and mid 20th century. We still see and feel this novel's effects in the way our government runs today as it attempts to keep up and reverse the effect humans have had on our environment today – especially with climate change. I feel confident in saying that we would not have had Earth Day and continue to celebrate today without the research and documentation against DDT in *Silent Spring*. Without its research it my belief that the Environmental movement of the 20th century would have died off, along with many animals and even humans for seemingly no reason at all. *Silent Spring* brought ecology and the ethical use of environmental technologies like DDT into the public sphere as today there are higher number of biology, environmental science and chemistry majors, especially amongst women. There is also a large part of our childhood education that is dedicated to learning about and respecting the environment, another part of our life that was heavily influenced due to the education from *Silent Spring*.

Carson's research in *Silent Spring* made Earth day and environmental awareness a worldwide phenomenon. For example, in 2007, "Some 10,000 Earth Day celebrations are held around the world...which sets a record for attendance in a single day."<sup>9</sup> 9 years later, 175 nations came together to sign the Paris Climate Agreement to lay out how they would be attacking climate change.<sup>10</sup> This year we celebrate the 50th anniversary of Earth Day and, like many Americans, I received a newspaper on my front door recognizing and praising the work of

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<sup>9</sup> "Earth Day before '70 and Since", *USA Today*

<sup>10</sup> "Earth Day before '70 and since," *USA Today*.

Dr. Jane Goodall, Rachel Carson, and Denis Hayes. The work of *Silent Spring* is also present in our academia as children and young adults in Biology, Social Studies, History and English classes; I even did a paper on *Silent Spring* in 8th and 12th grade. Today we are entering into a world of “organic” and “clean” foods, a health craze that is sweeping the nation as we attempt to rid our bodies of all “toxins”, “hormones” and “additives” that are foreign to our bodies and attempt to eat food that is low in fat, high in protein and unfortunately quite expensive. Clean eating has now manifested itself as a “challenge to mainstream ways of eating powered by social media, it was been more absolutist in its claims and popular in its reach than any previous school of modern nutrition advice.”<sup>11</sup>

Although *Silent Spring* is best known for its involvement in the Environmental Movement of the 20th century, it also impacted the government’s part in addressing environmental needs, educating the public about their health, and is still very much looked to today as warning and look into what we are still doing wrong today. *Silent Spring* has aged gracefully and is more important than ever as we literally face the fight of our lives during climate change. As we move on from the Environmental Movement of the 20th century and face the depleting ozone layer, growing population and health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, we still look to this book for guidance. For Carson had an uncanny way of seeing into the future and possessing the ability to distinguish the faults of society 20 years in advance. *Silent Spring* could not be more important and impactful in the past 100 years. Something that stuck with me as I wrote this paper and I think really encompass the entire book is, “who would want to live in a world which is just not quite fatal.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Wilson, “Why we Fell for Clean Eating,” *The Guardian*.

<sup>12</sup> Carson, “*Silent Spring*” 12.



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