



Times-News

CARRYING ON THE LEGACY OF RACHEL CARSON

Monday, October 19, 2009
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ECO NOTES



Just over half a century ago, a bestselling author, naturalist and marine biologist working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was shocked to discover increasing evidence that a new pesticide was causing widespread environmental havoc. DDT, a broad spectrum pesticide, was used to remove malaria-causing insects during WW II in Southeast Asia. However, when it was issued for civilian use in 1945, a disturbing trend became clear. Wherever it was used, the wholesale disappearance of birds followed. Unlike many pesticides, whose effectiveness was limited to destroying one or two types of insects, DDT was capable of killing hundreds of different kinds at once, both harmful insects as well as those that helped with pest control. When birds ate the affected insects, they either died or their eggs were so seriously damaged that few hatched.

Rachel Carson tried to publish some articles about the issue in various magazines. Not one was willing to do so, given the advertising power of the petrochemical and oil industry. Carson's mission was clear, publish a book to reveal to the world the harm caused by DDT and similar chemicals. This led to the landmark publication in 1962 of *Silent Spring*.

In the 1950s and 60s, technology was considered America's new god. Seemingly everyday a new miracle was discovered -- wonder drugs, modern conveniences such as plastic containers and new ways to grow crops. To question science and technology was considered heretical. Carson was the first to issue a challenge that technological progress can be so fundamentally at odds with natural processes that it must be curtailed. Her fight against chemical pesticides that damaged entire ecosystems led to new laws prohibiting DDT and an entire class of pesticides.

However, Rachel Carson's legacy must continue. Every year, the government approves hundreds of new chemicals for use on crops, in foods, in cosmetics and toys. According to Dr. John Brock, one of the country's leading analytical chemists who worked for the Center for Disease Control for over a decade and now a professor at Warren Wilson College, the average American's blood contains over 500 toxic chemicals. Many of these substances are carcinogenic or have other serious side effects.

What do we do today to carry on Rachel Carson's legacy? The first step might lie in understanding that our modern conveniences have consequences and that we do have a choice, one that could affect the future of our species. Is it more important that we eradicate every dandelion on our front lawn or is it better to protect water quality by minimizing the use of pesticides, insecticides and chemical fertilizers that runoff into our streams causing havoc to aquatic life? Is it better to eat dinner in four minutes, or prepare healthier foods grown locally that lack chemical preservatives and heavy pesticides and therefore protect our families' health. Critically analyzing how we live our lives could very well prolong the quality of life of our family and our community.

"Man's attitude toward nature is today critically important simply because we have now acquired a fateful power to alter and destroy nature. But man is a part of nature, and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself. We are challenged as mankind has never been challenged before to prove our maturity and our mastery, not of nature, but of ourselves." Rachel Carson, 1963

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