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## “Silent Spring at 50: The False Crises of Rachel Carson” (Reassessing environmentalism’s fateful turn from science to advocacy)

by Roger Meiners - September 21, 2012

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- Roger Meiners, et. al (cover insert)

Widely credited with launching the modern environmental movement when published 50 years ago, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* has had a profound impact on our society. While Carson was not the first to write about the dangers of pesticides or to sound environmental alarms, her writing style and ability to reach out to a broad audience allowed her to capture and retain the attention of the public.

Yet this iconic book, hardly scrutinized over the decades, substituted sensationalism for fact and apocalyptic pronouncements for genuine knowledge.

Our just released 11-author study, *Silent Spring at 50: The False Crises of Rachel Carson*, reexamines Carson’s historical context and science, as well as the policy consequences of *Silent Spring*’s core ideas. We assembled scholars from different disciplines and asked them to evaluate Carson’s work given the state of knowledge at the time she was writing. What information was available that she ignored? Where did she deviate from accepted science of the day?

Our findings are unsettling. Carson made little effort to provide a balanced perspective and consistently ignored key evidence that would have contradicted her work. Thus, while the book provided a range of notable ideas, a number of Carson’s major arguments rested on what can only be described as *deliberate ignorance*.

Despite her reputation as a careful science- and fact-based writer, Carson produced a best-seller full of significant errors and sins of omission. Three areas are particularly noteworthy:

- Carson vilified the use of DDT and other pest controls in agriculture but ignored their role in saving millions of lives worldwide from malaria, typhus, dysentery, among other diseases. Millions of deaths, and much greater human suffering, ultimately resulted from pesticide bans as part of disease-eradication campaigns. Carson knew of the beneficial effects of DDT, but never discussed it; her story was all negative.

- Far from being on the verge of collapse, American bird populations were, by and large, increasing at the time of *Silent Spring's* publication. Although Carson was active in the Audubon Society, she ignored Audubon's annual bird count, which had long been the best single source on bird population. Instead she relied on anecdotes claiming bird population was collapsing. It is inconceivable that Carson did not know about the annual bird count—some of which occurred in the locations she asserted were in collapse.

- Cancer rates, exaggerated in the book, were increasing largely because far fewer people were dying from other diseases. Further, once statistical adjustments are made for population age and tobacco use, the apparent rise in cancer rates that so alarmed *Silent Spring* readers disappeared. Although writing at a time when scientists had come to agree that tobacco was a major cause of lung cancer, Carson ignored tobacco and relied on peculiar theories about its origins. She specifically ignored Public Health Service data on this point.

Silent Spring presented nature as a benign happy place that was “in balance.” Man was guilty of upsetting the balance and causing environmental catastrophes. As shown in the chapter on that issue, nature is far more nuanced and resilient than Carson understood. Her view that “natural” pests, such as wasps, could be used to control other bugs that were harmful in crop production, was not only short of the mark for agriculture, but overly optimistic about how benign such “natural” pests can be.

Carson's “you can't be too safe” standard is seen today in the “precautionary principle” that helps to retard the adoption of superior technology that would benefit people and the environment. Her simplified view of risk appears to have impacted the drafting of the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act that set impossible standards in some areas not remotely related to human health or technical feasibility.

An intellectual, and public policy reconsideration, of Carson's 1962 *Silent Spring* is long overdue.