

'Silent Spring' revered and overwrought

By: Rory Cohen – October 29th, 2012

In the late 19th century, the Audubon Society was created to address concerns about disappearance of American bird species. These concerns stemmed not from fear over chemicals, but were due in large part to women's hat fashions that required the slaughtering of birds for feathers. "That there should be an owl or ostrich left with a single feather apiece hardly seems possible," an 1897 issue of Harper's Bazaar commented. Egg collection, hunting and habitat destruction also led to activists pushing to protect bird populations from being decimated.

Years later, Rachel Carson, author of "Silent Spring," called a half-century later a "beautifully crafted but ultimately flawed polemic" on misuse of pesticides, had a local appointment with Audubon and used her ecological expertise to connect with American readers about utilization of chemical repellants which she alleged would lead to systematic destruction of bird populations.

Carson has been dubbed the mother of the environmental movement. Her 1962 book led to the banning of DDT, which some experts say has indirectly led to millions of preventable malaria deaths in Africa. "Silent Spring at 50," from three editors at the libertarian Cato Institute, is a critical inquiry that delves into Carson's core arguments – and her reasons – for overstating the dangers of pesticides. Various essays provide multiple, well-researched perspectives that examine the historical context of "Silent Spring." The essays note the faulty science behind many of the alarmist conclusions made by Carson and overzealous environmentalists, and strive to make recommendations about public health policy based on what we know about pesticides.

The editors make an effective case that Carson was not merely a scientist, but an activist perhaps influenced by theology, ironic considering that she became an icon in the environmental movement, a religion itself – albeit a secular one. "Carson, like many a Protestant preacher before her, called for a new era of repentance and reform," the authors note.

In her writing, it is clear that Carson, who claimed she was against the misuse of pesticides, a laudable position, was actually in favor of a zero-residue policy.

Carson's "technophobia" and "alarmism" perhaps wasn't malicious in intent, but it was purposely deceitful. For example, the book elaborates on a long-argued point that Carson's erroneous claims about pesticide use on birds and other animals led to their

destruction. "Not a single case of poisoning attributable to DDT treatment at one pound per acre was reported," the authors quote Thomas J. Jukes, one of Carson's earliest critics. "Officials of the National Audubon Society were satisfied no damage was done to bird life, including nestling birds," Jukes had noted.

The authors also reveal that Carson ignored cancer-causing agents found in tobacco when making a case that increase in pesticide use may be linked to cancer in humans. Citing raw data on cancer, they wonder if Carson could have actually been "blind to the fact that lung cancer among men was the only form of cancer rising rapidly among men in the 1950s, while among women it barely moved," observing that "lung cancer jumped because the percentage of men who smoked increased significantly during World War II."

Ultimately, "Silent Spring at 50" presents numbers that show containment – and eradication – of diseases like malaria due to use of DDT. The authors point out that Carson was largely dismissive of using DDT and chemicals in general in disease control. Yet Carson's biographers attempt to portray her as "having rationally assessed pesticides" despite the fact she very clearly made "no safe dose" arguments in her book.

The Cato Institute book takes an iconic work of nonfiction, written when there was much concern and fear about chemicals, and sets the record straight. "If Rachel Carson had limited herself to detailing the common 1950s failures and abuses of government pesticide spraying for insect control, there would be much less to criticize in Silent Spring," the authors contend. Unfortunately, her doomsday scenario of a silent town with nary a bird in sight led to the banning of DDT.

Carson was correct that government spraying had some negative consequences, but instead of limiting her central argument to that, she "ventured into much broader realms of dire prediction and alarmism."