



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Section VII: The Appearance of Silent Spring

Description

An essay on 'Silent Spring' by Rachel Carson.

Body

In the spring of 1962 Rachel Carson was still passionately working towards the completion of her book. A title had been found. Originally intended for the chapter on birds, *Silent Spring* stuck as the book's final title.

A condensed version of *Silent Spring* was to be published in the *New Yorker* in three parts, starting on June 16. This publication contained about one-third of the book's entire text. In September, Houghton Mifflin published the book in its entirety.

Even before publication, *Silent Spring* caused an uproar. Chemical manufacturers undertook a more aggressive public relations campaign and distributed brochures reaffirming the benefits of pesticides. The Velsicol Chemical Corporation of Chicago wrote a letter to Houghton Mifflin, in which they suggested halting the book's publication due to what they identified as "inaccurate and disparaging statements" about two of their products, chlordane and heptachlor. A government official attacked Carson personally, saying "I thought she was a spinster. What's she worried about genetics for?"⁽¹⁾

Others took her writings more seriously. President Kennedy ordered the Science Advisory Committee to study the effects of pesticides. Congressman John V. Lindsay inserted the last paragraphs of the first third of the *New Yorker* release into the *Congressional Record*

Highly successful even before its publication date -- it was bought by the Book-of-the-Month Club and had advance sales of 40,000 -- *Silent Spring* caused a great controversy when it finally appeared. Two major industry associations flooded the press with articles, the theme of which was that these chemicals were mankind's only sure defense against starvation and disease. The chemical companies threatened to withdraw their advertisements from magazines and newspapers that favorably reviewed the book, gave doctors information kits to relieve patients' fears about chemical poisoning, and enlisted the Nutrition Foundation to make a rebuttal against *Silent Spring*. Ironically, these attacks gave the book even more publicity.

In preparing for her Women's National Book Association speech, Carson wrote that there was already some awareness of the problem but the facts had to be brought together. If she had not written the book, she was sure that the ideas would have come out anyway. But since she knew the facts, she could not rest until she had brought them to public attention.[\(2\)](#)

Silent Spring was written to alert the public and stir people to action against the abuse of chemical pesticides. In the book, Carson explained what the poisons are and how mankind has not studied their potential harm. Concluding, Carson suggested more research on the effects of pesticides on all life forms, and the application of alternate methods of pest control.

It is important to realize that Rachel Carson did not object to all use of chemical pesticides. In a special one-hour television report broadcast on April 3, 1963, Carson said that she did not contend that chemical insecticides must never be used, but that we had used powerful chemicals with little advance investigation of their effect on the environment and man himself.[\(3\)](#)

Although she did not approve of any use of the long-lasting chlorinated hydrocarbon insecticides, Carson believed that shorter-lived pesticides could be used responsibly.

Mainly due to *Silent Spring*, over forty bills had been introduced to regulate pesticide use in various states by the end of 1962.

- [\(1\)](#)Graham, 50.
- [\(2\)](#)Graham, 53-54. (We have not used Rachel Carson's exact words because Fran Collins, the Trustee of Rachel Carson's estate, does not want any quotations from Carson to appear on the WWW. You may read her exact words

in the source cited.)

- [\(3\)](#)Marco, 16. (For the original version, see the source cited).

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