

# In tribute of Rachel Carson (1907 – 1964)

Hans-Jørgen Wallin Weihe

The Inland University of Applied Sciences Lillehammer Norway

H-J.Wallin.Weihe@inn.no



Rachel Carson, 1940

We all individually might experience economical benefit from certain environmental damaging practices. The examples are numerous. Cleaning paintbrushes after painting a house produce harmful wastematerial that should be disposed in certain ways. Batteries should be treated as dangerous wastematerial. Still, in both cases we will be able to avoid the extra work without anyone noticing our harmful practices. We save time and sometimes even money polluting the environment. At times we make beautiful gardens without weeding wikt ba little chemistry helping us

All examples are from ordinary life situations many of us will be faced with. The result of such actions will be harmful to the environment and in the end to ourselves and other living beings. The short-term profit is of course not a lasting profit. Some harmful practices will damage future generations and some will in the space of time damage ourselves. Still, it is a difference between the collective and individual perspective. Thus the moral obligation to pursue sound environmental practices is of crucial importance to make people make the right choices.

The false sense of order of manicured and cultivated nature is seductive. We think of such nature as organized and orderly. Yet, a jungle or wilderness is obviously more orderly. In thhe hungle or wilderness ivisible laws of ecology dicate „the relative abundance of of plants

and animals, and were they occur. The very shape and position of every leaf abides by those eternal rules“ (Flannery, 2012: 23). Still, we experience the tortured disciplined natured lawns and fields of humans as more orderly. Even more we devastate nature in order to increase the output of the various monocultures of modern agriculture.

On April 14, 1964 a tiny, modest and yet very vocal and very influential lady died. She died from cancer. She had suffered from duodenal ulcer and pneumonia, followed by acute sinusitis and discovered two lumps in her breast in 1960. She underwent surgery and it was found that one of the tumors had been malignant. Radical mastectomy had to be performed. In 1961 it was discovered secondary tumors on her sternum and radiation therapy was started. She became very exhausted, still she managed to write the most important environmental books of last century. At the end of 1962 she wrote to her close friend Dorothy Freeman that she never had any choice, but to write the book. She quoted Abraham Lincoln;“ to sin by silence when they should protest makes cowards of men“. Her name was Rachel Carson. The title of the book was “Silent spring“. As pointed out by Tim Flannery in a book review in The New York Review of Books; “Was there ever a more resonating book title ? The possibility of a “silent spring“ strikes so acutely at our sense of life , beauty, and nature’s renewal that it chills us deeply as a perpetual winter. “ The book opens with a description of small-town America, secure and rich in wildlife and then devastated by a „rain of death“ (Flannery, 2012: 23).

A vast amount of hidden research supported the simple well phrased words of the book. A long fight of controlling pesticides would follow and in 1972 an important victory when DDT was banned in USA. It was proven and accepted that pesticides polluted the atmosphere, soil and water and caused death by cancer, diabetes and other diseases. Still the fight continued. Other pesticides continued to be used and quite a number are still used. The province of Ontario banned pesticides for lawns and flower gardens in 2009. A review in British Columbia in 2012 recommended tighter restrictions and in the Canadian province of Manitoba a ban was discussed. However, in many countries pesticides remain uncontrolled and it has been estimated that around one million humans annually suffer acute poisoning (Flannery: 2101: 21). We have similar discussions in Europe, however none of them with as far reaching bans as in Canada.



Rachel Carson conducts Marine Biology Research with Bob Hines. Atlantic Coast 1952.

The same year the Cuban missile crisis developed. The relationship between the Soviet Union and USA was at its coldest and the world at the brink of nuclear war. In the middle of the developing crisis the American president Kennedy answered a question of pesticide use. In his answer he referred to advance extracts of the book published by Rachel Carson in "The New Yorker". Later the same year the *Silent Spring* climbed to the top of the New York Times best-seller list. In her recently released biography of Rachel Carson, William Saunders claims that *Silent Spring* marks the birth of the concept "environmentalism". In his book Saunders describes the concept as "bitterly divisive" and claims that environmental politics before the book was characterized by "gentle, optimistic proposition called „conservation“ (Saunders, 2012). In contrast environmentalism was politically polarizing because it involved a conflict with pesticide manufacturers such as the large chemical firm of Ciba.

The scare of nuclear war most likely made *Silent Spring* all the more important. Armageddon could be envisaged with nuclear rockets being launched simultaneously from the USA and the Soviet Union. Hitting the other and creating a white hot hell of thermonuclear doom and an invisible cloud of nuclear radiation. Other popular authors of prose, like Neville Shute, created vivid images of a world empty of human life with a cloud of radiation slowly creeping down from the northern hemisphere towards Australia and countries in the south killing all living life.

In the 1950s American school children were drilled to duck and cover under their school desks by their teachers. Still, protection seemed nearly fruitless. President Eisenhower declared that it was just not enough bulldozers to scarpe the bodies off the streets.

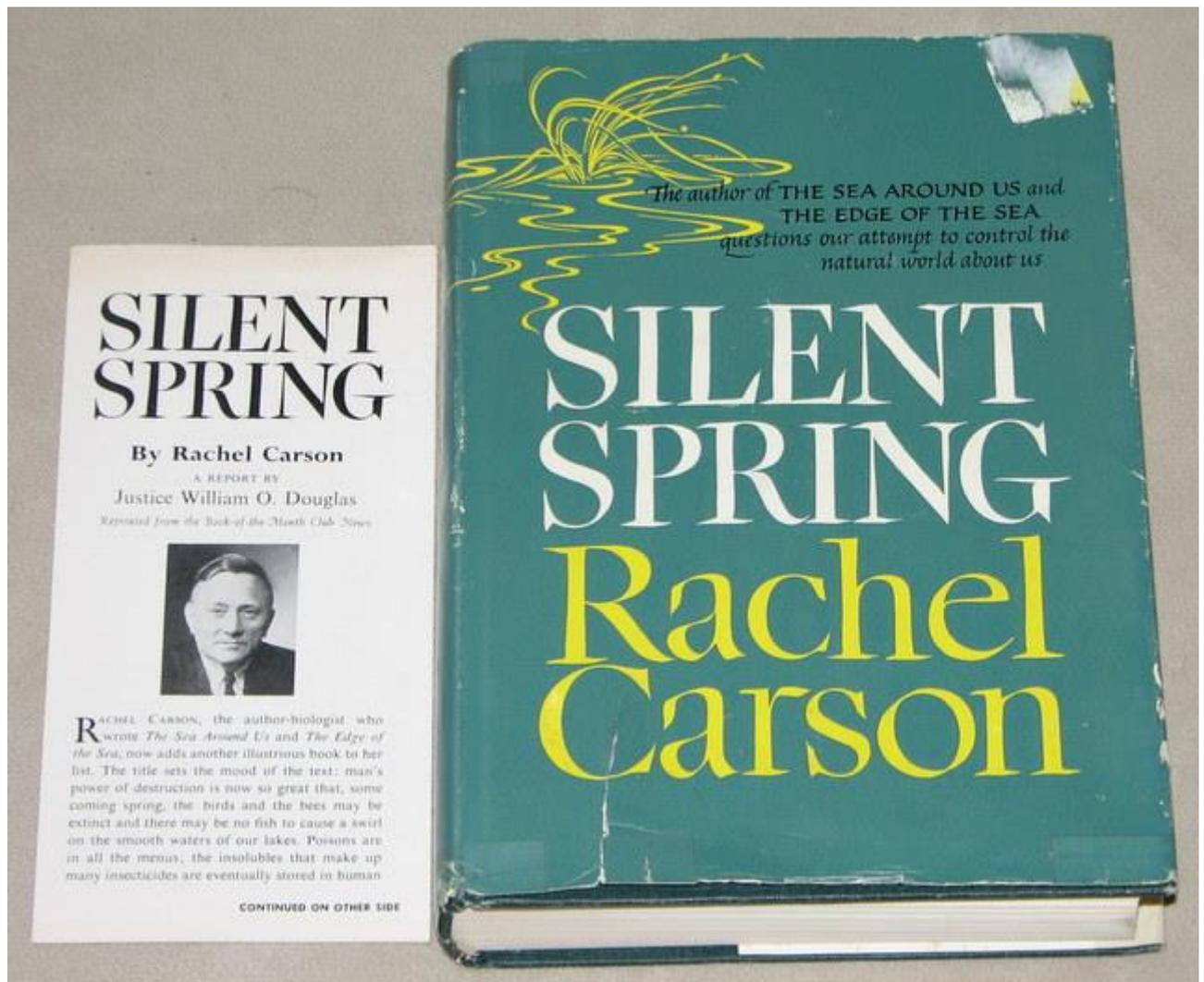
In the 1960s a series of nuclear tests were being conducted in Australia, in Micronesia and in Russia. Most of the tests was with the new devastating weapon the hydrogen bomb being exploded in the atmosphere with unpredictable and terrifying results. In 1954 one bomb was exploded at the Marshall Island producing an explosion two and a half time greater than the estimates by the scientists. In the words of the American president Eisenhower the scientists were “surprised and astonished” and had to rethink the precautions for new tests. The scientists should have been scared and in the opinions of today from a moral point of view they ought to have rejected further tests. However, in the 1950s and the 1960s, such a stand would have been unacceptable and equal to being a traitor.

Luckily there were farsighted individuals and there were people protesting. A small obscure group of individuals in the USA called the “Greater St. Louis Citizens Committee for Nuclear Information” started a collection of baby teeth from their area. A study completed in 2010 showed that men that died of cancer in middle age had more than twice the amount of radioactive strontium 90 in their baby teeth as those that were still alive. Thanks to those who collected the teeth, the few of them still alive in their 70s, 80s and 90s, the proof was there of the devastating long-term effect of radiation. For environmentalists of today the collection of baby teeth gives an important lesson of the importance of initiatives not acknowledged as important by scientists and society.

The danger of nuclear fall-out was from early on connected to the use of pesticides. In the USA the traditional Thanksgiving dinner involves a large turkey, sage and cranberries. In 1959 people had to throw away their cranberries because they had been sprayed by a cancer-causing pesticide. The berries had to be withdrawn from sale and many people had the shocking experience of eating Thanksgiving turkey without cranberries. In some ways it was like having Christmas without Santa Claus because he was likely to spread typhus or some other dangerous contagious disease.

Rachel Carson herself was not against all use of pesticides. She accepted some controlled use of pesticides in order to protect crops, but within limits so that use would not damage the environment and animal life. Still, there were pesticides she found so harmful and destructive that they had to be banned.

Fifty years after Rachel Carson published her book we know the importance of her publication. At the time she was well acknowledged as a writer, however the fight for practical acceptance of her ideas was a tough one. The industrial interests behind the production and use of pesticides spread lies about her such as that she was a communist, that her research was tainted and that she was anti American. The accusations resulted in her being investigated by the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigations) and made many people sceptical towards her. For that matter quite a number of people still are.



The first print-run of Silent Spring was 150.000 copies

At the time of publishing Silent Spring Rachel Carson was already a best selling author. She had for several years worked as a writer for the Fish and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Interior. Her first book was published in 1941 and won great popularity. It was called "Under the Sea-Wind" and was called "beautiful and unusual", however it only sold 1.700 copies. In 1950 she published her first best-seller "The Sea around us". Actually the book won great popularity even before it was printed as a book. To popular weekly magazine "The New Yorker" had printed ten chapters in advance and other magazines had printed other chapters. As soon as the book was released it reached the best- selling list and soon afterwards "Under the Sea-Wind" became a best- seller too.

The two best-selling books made Rachel Carson financially independent. She bought a property on Southport Island off the coast of Maine. It is a rough coastline, however it is dotted with islands and protected inlets and bays. Southport Island is a windblown place with just 250 residents. However, it is the vacation place for many wealthy americans interested in sailing and isolation rather than crowded warm beaches further south.

In 1955 she delivered the manuscript to another book. It was given the title "The Edge of the Sea". The book was three years behind schedule and it was to her astonishment another best-

seller. From the publishing point of view Rachel Carson's success was a great surprise. Most other books at the bestselling lists were popular fiction. Her books were nature books, they were popularized scientific books yet based on immense amounts of reading and a great dedication and ability to describe nature and her surroundings.

Actually Rachel Carson did very little research on her own, still she had a great ability to analyze and use the research of others. Even more important she was able to relate the research and state of the art science to surroundings in ways most people could understand. "Silent Spring" was to be the last of her books. The scale of research involved behind the book was immense and she had a hard time finishing the work. The title she had thought of for the book was "Man against the Earth", however her publisher Paul Brooks suggested "Silent Spring". Initially that was a title for the chapters on the impacts of pesticides on birds. That title strikes the emotions of most of us, and it still does.

In 1962 Rachel Carson was a 55 year old spinster, a single unmarried lady, living with her adopted grandnephew and a cat in Maryland and spending her summers in Maine. She was in no way a typical revolutionary nor protester. In addition to her skills as a writer and as a scientist that made her all the more convincing. She was a deeply worried lady that loved the birds coming to her birdfeeder, enjoyed flowers and butterflies, took great care of her adopted son and loved walking along the beach looking at crabs, sea shells and what ever else was to be found. She was the kind of lady that children loved to be with, young people found interesting and the older ones hardly had noticed until her carefully well phrased penetrating words reached the public. After that she was a celebrity and those few people who walked along the seashore with her found that she was able to open a wonderful, beautiful, unbelievable world to them. The superlatives are not mine they are from Dorothy Freeman who walked along the shore with Rachel Carson. She uttered them after looking at samples they had collected through a microscope.

In her own words to a person she loved she could go on and tell reasons why she loved. However, that would take quite a while and she thought that the simple fact that she loved covered everything. Even if those words were to another human being, to Dorothy Freeman, they cover her dedication to nature and life as well. Rachel Carson was a great writer because she managed to communicate her love and dedication to nature.

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