

# Message of 'Silent Spring' Still Resonates

By Richard W. Franke

This is the latest installment in our Signs of Sustainability series, organized by Sustainable Tompkins. Visit them online at [www.sustainable-tompkins.org](http://www.sustainable-tompkins.org).

Last October marked the 50th anniversary of Rachel Carson's book "Silent Spring," published in 1962, just a year-and-a-half before her untimely death from breast cancer and other illnesses at age 56. We in the sustainability movement today owe a lot to Rachel Carson—to her intellectual brilliance, to her beautiful writing, to her courage and to her perseverance. And to her insistence on the people's right to know.

Carson, born in 1907, was a zoologist and marine biologist who worked for many years for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. She is considered one of the finest science writers ever, producing a series of books and articles, including "Under the Sea Wind" (1941), "The Sea Around Us" (1951) and "The Edge of the Sea" (1955), as well as several technical reports for the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Her masterpiece, "Silent Spring," is widely recognized as one of the most influential books of the 20th century. Thousands of citations to

the book have appeared in scientific journals and popular publications over the decades. The book has been published in France, Germany, Italy, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Holland, Spain, Brazil, Japan, Iceland, Portugal and Israel and has influenced environmental legislation in all those countries.

Questions about the possible harmful effects of the pesticide DDT make up a substantial portion of "Silent Spring," and for many readers Carson's warnings about the health consequences of pesticides constitute the essence of the book. A particular concern is the possibility that pesticides cause cancer and birth defects. Recent evidence now also implicates DDT and other POPs (Persistent Organic Polluters) in endocrine disruption—interfering with the operation of human hormones. Endocrine disruption threatens a wide range of possible human harm.

In chapter three of "Silent Spring," Carson wrote the first scientific account of the mechanisms by which pesticides interfere with life processes in language understood by non specialists. She explicitly disavowed the total cessation of pesticide spraying. She argued instead for careful and limited usage.

"Silent Spring" ignited a fierce public debate over the safety of synthetic pesticides that cannot be found in nature. Carson was attacked by representatives of the chemical industry. A lawyer for the Velsicol Chemical Corp. attempted to prevent publication of the book by threatening a lawsuit just before it went to the printer.

Corporate and right-wing commentators continue to attack Carson and "Silent Spring." Most recently she has been accused of facilitating the deaths of hundreds of millions of Africans from malaria. Go to <http://rachelwaswrong.org> and read the charges against her. An extensive and detailed refutation of the charges appears in a 2010 book by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, "Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco to Global Warming." An online summary of their defense of "Silent Spring" can be accessed at [www.huffingtonpost.com/naomi-oreskes/emshadow-elitem-merchant\\_b\\_615504.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/naomi-oreskes/emshadow-elitem-merchant_b_615504.html).

And check out [www.silentsspring.org](http://www.silentsspring.org) and [www.rachelcarson.org](http://www.rachelcarson.org) to see some of the ongoing research on human health Carson's work has generated.

Please turn to page 11

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Pages 6 and 11

Environmental Defense Fund, which later led the battle to ban DDT—a ban that took effect in the U.S. in 1972. Today Carson continues to inspire people around the world demanding to know what chemicals are being added to our environment, whether they have been properly tested and whether they fit into the web of life she defended in "Silent Spring." More on Carson will appear in part two of this piece.

Richard W Franke writes about the history of sustainability. He is professor emeritus of anthropology at Montclair State University, a resident of EcoVillage at Ithaca and a board member of Sustainable Tompkins.

In 1963, "Silent Spring" led, in part, to the appointment by President Kennedy of a President's Science Advisory Commission. This was followed by congressional hearings that most observers believe vindicated Carson's warnings that some pesticides and spraying campaigns threatened to cause environmental and health disasters.

"Silent Spring" was the impetus for the founding in 1967 of the

Continued from page 6

'Silent Spring'