

RACHEL CARSON (1907–1964)

Hamish Kidd gives a brief introduction to the life of Rachel Carson, whose book *Silent Spring* was one of the landmark books of the 20th century.[†] This is followed by two viewpoint articles about the significance of the book, and the progress over the last 40 years in dealing with the environmental problems highlighted in it



Biologist in Government

Rachel Carson was born in Springdale, Pennsylvania, USA, and educated at the Pennsylvania College for Women (now Chatham College), Woods Hole Marine Biological Laboratory and The Johns Hopkins University. She taught zoology at The Johns Hopkins University and at the University of Maryland School of Dentistry while she was finishing her graduate work. She was an aquatic biologist and editor at the United States Bureau of Fisheries and its successor, the Fish and Wildlife Service, from 1936 to 1952. She rose to become Editor-in-Chief of publications for the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. During this period she began writing books about the sea – *Under the Sea Wind* (1941) and *The Sea Around Us* (1951), for which she was awarded the 1952 National Book Award in non-fiction. In 1952 she quit her government job to take a Guggenheim Fellowship to work on her next book, *The Edge of the Sea* (1955). All three of these sea books appeared on the best-seller list and all are still in print.

Silent Spring

Disturbed by the widespread use of synthetic chemical pesticides after World War II, Carson reluctantly changed her focus in order to warn the public about the long-term effects of misusing pesticides. In 1962, she published *Silent Spring* which made her famous, or infamous, depending on

[†] The help of Linda Lear in the preparation of this biography is acknowledged. Linda has written the definitive biography of Rachel Carson – *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature* (1997).

your point of view. In her book she challenged the practices of agricultural scientists and the government, and called for a change in the way people viewed the natural world.

It is important to remember how much controversy *Silent Spring* aroused when it was published. Carson was attacked by the chemical industry and some in government as an alarmist, but courageously spoke out to remind people that they are as vulnerable as any other part of the ecosystem (a word introduced in the book). Testifying before Congress in 1963, Carson called for an independent agency to conduct research and monitor the use of pesticides and the health of the biota.

Still in print

Silent Spring remained on the bestseller list for months and remains in print now, 40 years later. Former-Vice President Al Gore, who wrote an introduction to the 35th edition of the book, is one of many people who credit Carson's work with prompting the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency. He and others have pointed out, however, that, for political reasons, the Agency has failed to live up to its promise. A new 40th anniversary edition of the book has been published in the USA with an introduction by Linda Lear, Rachel Carson's biographer.

Since its publication 40 years ago *Silent Spring* has helped millions of people to develop an environmental consciousness. One measure of her influence may be seen in the fact that chemical industry sources are *still* passionately trying to convince people that she was wrong, that "man" can "control" nature through chemistry, and from that fact that the website <http://www.rachelcarson.org> was accessed over 20,000 times between May and September 2002.

Rachel Carson died in 1964 after a long battle against breast cancer.

Further reading

<http://www.rachelcarson.org>
 Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring* (1962) Houghton Mifflin, New York and Penguin Books, London.
 Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring* (2000) Penguin Books, London.
 Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring* (40th anniversary edition, 2002), with introduction by Linda Lear and afterword by E. O. Wilson. Houghton Mifflin, New York.
 Lear, Linda. *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature* (1997) (the definitive biography of Rachel Carson)
 Marco, Gino, J.; Hollingworth, Robert M.; Durham, William *Silent Spring Revisited* (1987). American Chemical Society.