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DDT, Silent Spring, and the Rise of Environmentalism: Classic Texts

Thomas R. Dunlap
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Hindsight is said to be 20/20, but in matters of public health policy our communal vision may be blurred even sixty years later. DDT (dichloro-diphenyl-trichlorethane) has been banned in the U.S. since 1972 but debate about the benefits versus the dangers still holds a special place in public discourse.

DDT, Silent Spring, and the Rise of Environmentalism offers an enlightened retrospective on the pesticide's social evolution from miracle solution to public enemy number one. Beginning with an essay published in 1915 and offering accessible samples of both expert and public opinion through 2005, this book discusses all sides of the issue, including opinions from supporters of DDT's widespread use to those who stand with Rachel Carson and her call for an improved relationship with nature.

Leonard O. Howard states in the second essay of the book, first published in 1922, "…we are beginning to realize that insects are our most important rivals in nature and we are beginning to develop our defense." This defense gained great strength during World War II when DDT was used to help soldiers combat insect-born diseases like malaria and typhoid. After the war, its popularity blossomed as housewives and farmers alike welcomed the chance to exterminate the pesky critters who chewed on both kids and crops. But as early as 1946, writers such as Clarence Cotton and Elmer Higgins were describing the deadly consequences of DDT use on birds and mammals in their study, "DDT and Its Effects on Fish and Wildlife." It took another twenty-five years, however, for DDT to finally fall out of favor, this due in large part to Rachel Carson's keystone book, *Silent Spring.* DDT was banned in the U.S. in 1972. That hasn't stopped supporters like syndicated columnist Thomas Sowell from stating "…there has not been a mass murderer executed in the past half-century who has been responsible for as many deaths of human beings as the sainted Rachel Carson."

Thomas R. Dunlap's purpose as editor is one of historian rather than judge; every essay—no matter which side it argues from—is precise, intelligent, and revealing of the biases and limits of the decade. Dunlap's introductions to each section add hints of reflection and even redemption. Books like this remind people to treat today's new miracles with delicate care until they know where every path might lead.

ANDI DIEHN (August 15, 2008)

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