

# Address to the Women's National Press Club

## - Dec. 5, 1962 Rachel Carson

December 05, 1962— Washington, D.C.

*This address is one of Carson's most important statements following publication of "Silent Spring."*

My text this afternoon is taken from the Globe Times of Bethlehem, Pa., a news item in the issue of October 12. After describing in detail the adverse reactions to "Silent Spring" of the farm bureaus in two Pennsylvania counties, the reporter continued: "No one in either county farm office who was talked to today had read the book, but all disapproved of it heartily."

This sums up very neatly the background of much of the noisier comment that has been heard in this unquiet autumn following the publication of "Silent Spring". In the words of an editorial in the Bennington Banner, "The anguished reaction to "Silent Spring" has been to refute statements that were never made." Whether this kind of refutation comes from people who actually have not read the book or from those who find it convenient to misrepresent my position I leave it to others to judge.

Early in the summer—as soon as the first installment of the book appeared in the New Yorker—public reaction to "Silent Spring" was reflected in a tidal wave of letters—letters to Congressmen, to newspapers, to Government agencies, to the author. These letters continue to come and I am sure represent the most important and lasting reaction.

Even before the book was published, editorials and columns by the hundreds had discussed it all over the country. Early reaction in the chemical press was somewhat moderate, and in fact I have had fine support from some segments of both chemical and agricultural press.

But in general, as was to be expected, the industry press was not happy. By late summer the printing presses of the pesticide industry and their trade associations had begun to pour out the first of a growing stream of booklets designed to protect and repair the somewhat battered image of pesticides. Plans are announced for quarterly mailings to opinion leaders and for monthly news stories to newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. Speakers are addressing audiences everywhere.

It is clear that we are all to receive heavy doses of tranquilizing information, designed to lull the public into the sleep from which "Silent Spring" so rudely awakened it. Some definite gains toward a saner policy of pest control have been made in recent months. The important issue now is whether we are to hold and extend those gains.

The attack is now falling into a definite pattern and all the well-known devices are being used. One obvious way to try to weaken a cause is to discredit the person who champions it. So the masters of invective and insinuation have been busy: I am a "bird lover – a cat lover – a fish lover" – a priestess of nature – a devotee of a mystical cult having to do with laws of the universe which my critics consider themselves immune to.

Another piece in the pattern of attack largely ignores "Silent Spring" and concentrates on what I suppose would be called the soft sell, the soothing reassurances to the public. Some of these acknowledge the correctness of my facts, but say that the incidents I reported occurred some time in the past, that industry and Government are well aware of them and have long since taken steps to prevent their recurrence. It

1 of 4 1/29/20, 12:03 PM

Address to the Women's National Press Club – Dec. 5, 1962 | Archiv... <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2018/01/08/address-to-the-women...>

must be assumed that the people who read these comforting reports read nothing else in their newspapers. Actually, pesticides have figured rather prominently in the news in recent months: some items trivial, some almost humorous, some definitely serious.

These reports do not differ in any important way from the examples I cited in "Silent Spring", so if the situation is under better control there is little evidence of it.

[...]

We are told also that chemicals are never used unless tests have shown them to be safe. This, of course, is not an accurate statement. I am happy to see that the Department of Agriculture plans to ask the Congress to amend the FIFRA to do away with the provision that now permits a company to register a pesticide under protest, even though a question of health or safety has been raised by the Department.

We have other reminders that unsafe chemicals get into use – County Agents frequently have to amend or rescind earlier advices on the use of pesticides. For example, a letter was recently sent out to farmers recalling stocks of a chemical in use as a cattle spray. In September, “unexplained losses” occurred following its use. Several suspected production lots were recalled but the losses continued. All outstanding lots of the chemical have now had to be recalled.

Inaccurate statements in reviews of "Silent Spring" are a dime a dozen, and I shall only mention one or two examples. Time, in its discussion of "Silent Spring", described accidental poisonings from pesticides as very rare. Let's look at a few figures. California, the only state that keeps accurate and complete records, reports from 900 to 1000 cases of poisoning from agricultural chemicals per year. About 200 of these are from parathion alone. Florida has experienced so many poisonings recently that this state has attempted to control the use of the more dangerous chemicals in residential areas. As a sample of conditions in

other countries, parathion was responsible for 100 deaths in India in 1958 and takes an average of 336 deaths a year in Japan.

It is also worthy of note that during the years 1959, 1960, and 1961, airplane crashes involving crop- dusting planes totaled 873. In these accidents 135 pilots lost their lives. This very fact has led to some significant research by the Federal Aviation Agency through its Civil Aeromedical Unit – research designed to find out why so many of these planes crashed. These medical investigators took as their basic premise the assumption that spray poisons accumulate in the pilot's body – inside the cells, where they are difficult to detect.

These researchers recently reported that they had confirmed two very significant facts: 1. That there is a causal relation between the build-up of toxins in the cell and the onset of sugar diabetes. 2. That the build- up of poisons within the cell interferes with the rate of energy production in the human body.

I am, of course, happy to have this confirmation that cellular processes are not so “irrelevant” as a certain scientific reviewer of "Silent Spring" has declared them to be.

This same reviewer, writing in a chemical journal, was much annoyed with me for giving the sources of my information. To identify the person whose views you are quoting is, according to this reviewer, name-dropping. Well, times have certainly changed since I received my training in the scientific method at Johns Hopkins! My critic also profoundly disapproved of my bibliography. The very fact that it gave complete and specific references for each important statement was extremely distasteful to him. This was padding to impress the uninitiated with its length.

2 of 4 1/29/20, 12:03 PM

Address to the Women's National Press Club – Dec. 5, 1962 | Archiv... <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2018/01/08/address-to-the-women...>

Now I would like to say that in "Silent Spring" I have never asked the reader to take my word. I have given him a very clear indication of my sources. I make it possible for him – indeed I invite him – to go beyond what I report and get the full picture. This is the reason for the 55 pages of references. You cannot do this if you are trying to conceal or distort or to present half truths.

Another reviewer was offended because I made the statement that it is customary for pesticide manufacturers to support research on chemicals in the universities. Now, this is just common knowledge and I can scarcely believe the reviewer is unaware of it, because his own university is among those receiving such grants.

[...]

A penetrating observer of social problems has pointed out recently that whereas wealthy families once were the chief benefactors of the Universities, now industry has taken over this role. Support of education is something no one quarrels with – but this need not blind us to the fact that research supported by pesticide manufacturers is not likely to be directed at discovering facts indicating unfavorable effects of pesticides.

Such a liaison between science and industry is a growing phenomenon, seen in other areas as well. The AMA, through its newspaper, has just referred physicians to a pesticide trade association for information to help them answer patients' questions about the effects of pesticides on man. I am sure physicians have a need for information on this subject. But I would like to see them referred to authoritative scientific or medical literature – not to a trade organization whose business it is to promote the sale of pesticides.

We see scientific societies acknowledging as "sustaining associates" a dozen or more giants of a related industry. When the scientific organization speaks, whose voice do we hear—that of science? or of the sustaining industry? It might be a less serious situation if this voice were

always clearly identified, but the public assumes it is hearing the voice of science.

What does it mean when we see a committee set up to make a supposedly impartial review of a situation, and then discover that the committee is affiliated with the very industry whose profits are at stake? I have this week read two reviews of the recent reports of a National Academy of Sciences Committee on the relations of pesticides to wildlife. These reviews raise disturbing questions. It is important to understand just what this committee is. The two sections of its report that have now been published are frequently cited by the pesticide industry in attempts to refute my statements. The public, I believe, assumes that the Committee is actually part of the Academy. Although appointed by the Academy, its members come from outside. Some are scientists of distinction in their fields. One would suppose the way to get an impartial evaluation of the impact of pesticides on wildlife would be to set up a committee of completely disinterested individuals. But the review appearing this week in *The Atlantic Naturalist* described the composition of the Committee as follows: "A very significant role in this committee is played by the Liaison Representatives. These are of three categories. A.) Supporting Agencies. B.) Government Agencies. C.) Scientific Societies. The supporting agencies are presumably those who supply the hard cash. Forty-three such agencies are listed, including 19 chemical companies comprising the massed might of the chemical industry. In addition, there are at least four trade organizations such as the National Agricultural Chemical Association and the National Aviation Trades Association."

The Committee reports begin with a firm statement in support of the use of chemical pesticides. From this predetermined position, it is not surprising to find it mentioning only some damage to some wildlife. Since, in the modern manner, there is no documentation, one can neither confirm or deny its findings. The *Atlantic Naturalist* reviewer described the reports as "written in the style of a trained public relations

Address to the Women's National Press Club – Dec. 5, 1962 | Archiv... <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2018/01/08/address-to-the-women...>

official of industry out to placate some segments of the public that are causing trouble.”

All of these things raise the question of the communication of scientific knowledge to the public. Is industry becoming a screen through which facts must be filtered, so that the hard, uncomfortable truths are kept back and only the harmless morsels allowed to filter through? I know that many thoughtful scientists are deeply disturbed that their organizations are becoming fronts for industry. More than one scientist has raised a disturbing question – whether a spirit of lysenkoism may be developing in America today – the philosophy that perverted and destroyed the science of genetics in Russia and even infiltrated all of that nation's agricultural sciences. But here the tailoring, the screening of basic truth, is done, not to suit a party line, but to accommodate to the short-term gain, to serve the gods of profit and production.

*Transcript from <http://www.beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2012/09/silent-spring-.html>.*