

Rachel Carson's Legacy

By Mary G. Henry

**Excerpt from *Silent Spring*:
“...synthetic pesticides have been so thoroughly distributed throughout the animate and inanimate world that they occur virtually everywhere. They have been recovered from most of the major river systems and even from streams of groundwater flowing unseen through the earth. Residues of these chemicals linger in soil to which they may have been applied a dozen years before. They have entered and lodged in the bodies of fish, birds, reptiles, and domestic and wild animals so universally that scientists carrying on animal experiments find it almost impossible to locate subjects free from such contamination. They have been found in fish in remote mountain lakes, in earthworms burrowing in soil, in the eggs of birds—and in man himself. For these chemicals are now stored in the bodies of the vast majority of human beings, regardless of age. They occur in the mother's milk, and probably in the tissues of the unborn child.”**

Our agency's contaminants legacy started back in 1936 with Rachel Carson. After earning her Master's degree in biology from Johns Hopkins University, she joined the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries (now the FWS). Carson first worked as a writer and eventually as editor-in-chief of the Wildlife Information Division.

During her 17 years as a government biologist, she became familiar with studies on fish and wildlife and the environmental impacts of pesticides on animal populations. At the time, little of this type of information had filtered into the popular press. Her decision to educate the public about the potential dangers facing wildlife and humans from chemical pesticides may have been influenced by reports of bird die-offs sent to her by a friend. Rachel Carson spent 5 years researching and writing *Silent Spring*, which was published in 1962. The public debate that ensued was huge, with the pesticide industry on one side and Carson (along with like-minded environmentalists and scientists) on the other. Regrettably, some of the same issues concerning the environmental consequences of using pesticides, especially when they are misused or overused, remain unresolved.

As a nature lover and naturalist, Rachel Carson made a point of regularly observing changes in biota as she walked through the woods and along the beach. This dedication to developing insight about the organisms and their environments is an ethic that today is very much alive in FWS biologists. Today's environmental contaminants biologists take pride in carrying on the legacy of Rachel Carson.

The Environmental Contaminants Program investigates the presence, magnitude, and effects of toxins and evaluates and applies solutions to

contaminant problems on Federal and non-Federal lands. It is a daunting task. The greatest challenge is to prevent creating additional problems for the next generation. As a society, we owe it to ourselves and to our children to leave a living legacy. And as we face the future, many of us ask: what would Rachel Carson say to her agency today?

We like to think she would say, “Good job. Your scientists are doing important conservation work, protecting natural resources from pollution. Keep the momentum going...but do more. Contaminants are just beginning to be understood, and they will be with us for a long, long time.”