

# Rachel Carson



## The Environment? Getting Worse

Carson's work came in the context of rapidly changing context for environmental problems. The damage she was seeing was part of a rapidly escalating series of environmental problems brought on by rapid production of chemicals and the process of modern industrialization. Two earlier problems highlight the rapidity and severity of the changes in the century before Carson published her work.

### *The Death of the Passenger Pigeons*

From Clive Ponting, *A Green History of the World (1992)*:

Probably the most terrible example of mass slaughter in the history of wildlife was not the bison but the passenger pigeon – a pigeon story that almost defies belief. The early Europeans in North America frequently commented on the huge numbers of blue, long-tailed, fast and graceful pigeons in the country. One of the first settlers in Virginia wrote that, 'There are wild pigeons in winter beyond number or imagination, myself have seen three or four hours together flocks in the air, so thick that even have they shadowed the sky from us.'

Their roosting sites were correspondingly enormous- some covered an area five miles by twelve with up to ninety nests in a single tree - branches broke and whole trees were toppled by the sheer weight of roosting birds, often standing on top of each other, and leaving a pile of droppings several inches deep under the trees. The exact number of passenger pigeons in North America when the Europeans arrived is not known but the best guess is 5 billion- about a third of all the birds in North America at the time and the same as the total number of birds to be found today in the United States.

The real onslaught began with the onset of large-scale commercial hunting carried out by well-organised trappers and shippers in order to supply the developing cities on the east coast of the United States with a cheap source of meat. It began once railways linking the Great Lakes area with New York opened in the early 1850s. By 1855 300,000 pigeons a year were being sent to New York alone. The worst of the mass slaughter took place in the 1800s and 1870s. The scale of the operation can be judged by figures that seem almost incredible but which were carefully recorded as part of a perfectly legal and highly profitable commerce. On just one day in 1860 (23 July) 235,200 birds were sent east from Grand Rapids in Michigan.

Not surprisingly, even the vast flocks of pigeons could not withstand slaughter on this scale. Numbers fell rapidly and by the late 1880s large flocks, which had once been so common, had become a matter for comment and investigation, and most were no more than a few hundred strong. The last known specimens were seen in most states of the eastern United States, in the 1890s, and the passenger pigeon died out in the wild in Ohio about 1900. The last survivor of a species that had once numbered 5 billion died in captivity in 1914.

### *That River's on Fire!*

From Ohio History Central:

On June 22, 1969, an oil slick and debris in the Cuyahoga River caught fire in Cleveland, Ohio, drawing national attention to environmental problems in Ohio and elsewhere in the United States.

This Cuyahoga River fire lasted just thirty minutes, but it did approximately fifty thousand dollars in damage -- principally to some railroad bridges spanning the river. It is unclear what caused the fire, but most people believe sparks from a passing train ignited an oil slick in the Cuyahoga River. This was not the first time that the river had caught on fire. Fires occurred on the Cuyahoga River in 1868, 1883, 1887, 1912, 1922, 1936, 1941, 1948, and in 1952. The 1952 fire caused over 1.5 million dollars in damage.

On August 1, 1969, Time magazine reported on the fire and on the condition of the Cuyahoga River. The magazine stated, 'Some River! Chocolate-brown, oily, bubbling with subsurface gases, it oozes rather than flows. "Anyone who falls into the Cuyahoga does not drown," Cleveland's citizens joke grimly. "He decays". . . The Federal Water Pollution Control Administration dryly notes: "The lower Cuyahoga has no visible signs of life, not even low forms such as leeches and sludge worms that usually thrive on wastes." It is also -- literally -- a fire hazard.'

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## Carson Biography (1907-1964)

- An American marine biologist and nature writer who probably became the most significant environmental writer in the United States
- She wrote a bestselling trilogy about the oceans: *The Sea Around Us*, *The Edge of the Sea*, and *Under the Sea Wind* in the 1950s.
- She became concerned about the impact of pesticides on the natural world, leading to the publication of *Silent Spring* (1962), one of the bestselling books in American history.
- Her work led to the development of grassroots environmentalism in the United States, the creation of Earth Day, and the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency.
  - As biographer Mark Hamilton Lytle writes, Carson "quite self-consciously decided to write a book calling into question the paradigm of scientific progress that defined postwar American culture." The overriding theme of *Silent Spring* is the powerful—and often negative—effect humans have on the natural world.
  - *Silent Spring* has become one of the most controversial books in American history, inspiring many environmentalists and leading others to claim that Carson was responsible for the deaths of millions.
- She died in 1964, following years of cancer treatments.



## Her Critique of Modern Society and Treatment of the Environment

- We face the prospect of a true Silent Spring,
- Dangerous New Mindset of Modern World
  - We are creating a chain of evil that cannot be reversed.
  - Over-reliance on chemicals to solve industrial problems.
  - It's possible that it's too late.
  - We may not see the symptoms of something that might destroy us in a generation until it's too late.
- Ecological Time is overwhelmed by Industrial Time-The environment changes/evolves/responds in a very slow process. Carson argued that the rapidity of modern industrial change and chemical development was outstripping the environment's ability to respond.
- Exterminism-we are becoming indiscriminate in our use of chemicals and poisons, killing far more than the pests we claim to be attacking.
- Violation of Human Rights-Carson argued that when we destroy the environment for others, we are also violating their human rights. For example, if I pollute a stream, the rights of the people downstream are violated.
- Misplaced, Almost Religious Faith in Science

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## The Alternative She Proposes

- Biological Solutions
- A Right to Know, Democratic Decision Making about the Environment
- Ecological Engineering
- Childlike Wonder and Appreciation of Nature
- Humility, Recognition of Both Human Limits and Ability to Do Harm

## Carson Quotations

- “We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road / the one less traveled by / offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth.”
- “The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well.”
- “To stand at the edge of the sea, to sense the ebb and flow of the tides, to feel the breath of a mist moving over a great salt marsh, to watch the flight of shore birds that have swept up and down the surf lines of the continents for untold thousands of year, to see the running of the old eels and the young shad to the sea, is to have knowledge of things that are as nearly eternal as any earthly life can be.”