

Environmentalism with a Human Face: A New Era of Collaboration on Environmental Factors and Health

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Forty years ago this fall, a book titled *Silent Spring* was published. This book was declared "the most influential book of the past 50 years" by a panel of distinguished Americans a few years ago, and in 2000, *Time* magazine named its author, Rachel Carson, one of the most important thinkers of the past century—along with such figures as Albert Einstein, Jonas Salk, Sigmund Freud, and Watson and Crick.

That's lofty company, but Carson earned her status. She began as a modest wildlife biologist and author of popular books on nature, whose inquisitive mind led her to examine the rapidly growing use of pesticides and their impact on living things. Then she became alarmed.

"The more I learned about the use of pesticides, the more appalled I became," Carson told an interviewer. "I realized that here was the material for a book. What I discovered was that everything that meant most to me as a naturalist was being threatened, and that nothing I could do would be more important."

Silent Spring became a classic work, and Carson a lasting heroine. But there was also a darker side to her book's reception. *Silent Spring* provoked an extreme reaction and counterattack from corporations who profited from the use of pesticides and other chemicals. Carson was threatened with lawsuits and called a "hysterical woman," and corporate sponsors pulled out of television shows featuring her. But her scientific writing and integrity held up to such defamation, and *Silent Spring* became a best-seller.

Carson died of cancer in 1964 at the age of 56. Near the end of her life she lamented "the senseless, brutish things that were being done" to nature, noting that "now I can believe that I have at least helped a little. It would be unrealistic to believe one book could bring a complete change."

Unfortunately, Carson was right. As much as her book was a watershed, the pollution of our environment with harmful chemicals continues—as just one example, the use of pesticides has doubled since she died. Concern about the impacts of this has broadened to include not only the birds and other animals she wrote about but human welfare as well. Almost everyone admits that the rest of nature has suffered from human actions and that our industrial pollutants are one of the means of that destruction. Now we face another battle for the free conducting and interpretation of scientific knowledge, and for rational action based upon that knowledge.

"Environmentalism" is one of the most important developments of our time. But it should not be just about whales, spotted owls, and forests, as important as those are. Human health is now also undeniably an environmental issue. Scientific evidence increasingly indicates linkages between chemical pollution and many important human diseases. While no one argues that chemicals are the only reason for the increase in these diseases, some very solid science is warning us that some of the tens of thousands of chemicals registered for use in the past 50 years might be a factor. And relatively few such substances are adequately tested regarding their impacts on human biology, unlike what we require for proposed medications.

The San Francisco Medical Society hosted a day-long forum on these issues in spring of 2002, when leading researchers and advocates presented their best knowledge and wisdom in this arena. We asked some of them to summarize their work for this issue of the journal, and their papers follow. After reading these contributions, we expect that any clinician will share our concern that human environmental health is a crucial issue.

For those motivated to learn more and perhaps to get more involved, we would draw your attention to a new network of scientific, medical, patient, environmental, and other organizations and individuals, which was launched at the SFMS conference. The Collaborative on Health and the Environment (CHE) has rapidly grown to include well over 200 partners, and has developed scientific background papers, co-sponsored a landmark legislative hearing in Sacramento, and much more. You can learn about CHE by visiting www.cheforhealth.org and/or calling 415/868-0970.

Environmentalism with a human face: It's an idea whose time is long overdue, and perhaps the most fitting legacy for Rachel Carson herself.

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