

EDITORIAL

Another Notable Anniversary Rachel Carson's 'Silent Spring' and its Influence

As we celebrate the 150th anniversary of the NSIS, it is worth reflecting again on other anniversaries of 2012. We of course share our anniversary year with the Bedford Institute of Oceanography, theirs being a 50th, soon resulting in a major celebratory book “Voyage of Discovery” (see the Ad in this issue).

Another very notable 50th anniversary in 2012 is that of *Silent Spring*, written by Rachel Carson, and that is the subject of this article. The date of publication was September 27th, 1962. Three excerpts had appeared in *The New Yorker* that summer. There was great public interest and growing anticipation in the government departments responsible for agriculture, wildlife conservation, and water and food quality. President John F. Kennedy, already a reader of the author's previous best-selling books on the seas (e.g. *Under the Sea Wind*; *The Sea Around Us*), was interested in seeing action taken immediately by his officials. Angst was felt by the chemical industry and rebuttals and law suits were being planned.

Rachel Carson, already renowned as a marine scientist and writer, was celebrated as a visionary and hero after *Silent Spring* was published. The book was a heartfelt, brilliantly researched and wonderfully written expose on the impacts of pesticides and other toxic chemical substances on the environment and its wildlife. It became an instant best seller, and selected as Book of the Month for October that year. *Silent Spring* is still in press, having sold over 2 million copies, in countless languages worldwide. It is considered one of the most influential books of the 20th century, and has been the subject of many books and articles. Among the most notable is Linda Lear's *Rachel Carson – Witness for Nature*.

Silent Spring led to discussion and debate about chemicals that resulted in new environmental legislation, new government departments (e.g. Environment Canada came into being a few years later), and most importantly a new public awareness of the health and environmental risks of living in a chemically dependent society. Why note this anniversary? Does *Silent Spring* still have lessons for us? Is it still worth

reading? The answers of course lie with each reader and perspective. But the view of many in conservation and the environmental sciences is that *Silent Spring* is a landmark in society's collective efforts to care for the environment, and it deserves revisiting. Its basic message - that chemicals can harm both wildlife and human health if not tested adequately prior to use and mishandled during use - is very valid today. The book's description of ecological processes was an early, accurate and eloquent attempt to describe ecology in a readily understood way. The book and its author have become icons in the struggle to protect and conserve natural environments, and protect human health from exposures to persistent toxic chemicals.

Carson's book, though dated in places, is as beautifully written as her other classics. She gave us a literary masterpiece that has inspired a generation of scientists and environmentalists. Its primary message is that we need to understand the implications of living in our chemical world to protect ourselves, our children, and our living landscapes, oceans and wildlife. Clearly, science has a huge responsibility to ensure this understanding and protection.

Of special note is a new biography of Rachel Carson titled: *On a Farther Shore: The Life and Legacy of Rachel Carson*, the author being William Souder. It sheds further light on the interplay between conservation and industrial interests. So, if interested, read this new book and read or re-read *Silent Spring*, while we continue to celebrate the NSIS 150th and communicate scientific advancements in the region.

Peter G. Wells, Editor