

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

The road less traveled

The Rachel Carson State Office Building in Harrisburg, home to the state Department of Environmental Protection, commemorates Pennsylvania's — and perhaps the nation's — greatest environmentalist.

Carson's 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, was a bombshell that challenged some of the nation's most fixed assumptions: that pesticides, fertilizers, and other chemicals were silver bullets, that when used in abundance, could assure a better world for all.

Instead, used indiscriminately, they were poisoning our world, she wrote.

Vilified by the chemical industry as an alarmist who lacked the qualifications to discuss chemical products (she only had a master's degree!), Carson nonetheless gained the attention of Congress and spurred a reversal in national pesticide policy, eventually leading to the banning of DDT in the U.S. and other developed countries, and a reassessment of the use of other pesticides.

Moreover, her book inspired a grassroots environmental movement that led to the creation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 1970.

(Carson, who was fatally ill with breast cancer even as she wrote *Silent Spring*, died in 1964.)

Born to a poor family in a village north of Pittsburgh, Carson earned a degree in biology from the Pennsylvania College for Women (now Chatham University) and her master's at Johns Hopkins University.

From the mid 1930s to 1952, Carson worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, where she gained voluminous knowledge of the natural world.

She wrote three best-selling books about aquatic life, which enabled her to retire from her government job and devote herself full time to writing.

Carson was troubled by the increasing evidence of the unintended consequences of pesticides like DDT.

DDT was originally hailed as a miracle substance. It killed lice, fleas, flies, mosquitos and other insects that carried typhus and malaria. First used during the Second World War in Europe and the Pacific, it unquestionably saved millions of lives.

Its inventor, Paul Müller, won a Nobel Prize in 1948.

But the property that made DDT so

effective — it did not dissipate — meant it poisoned everything it touched, climbing up the food chain and accumulating in the bodies of wildlife, especially birds.

As we noted on Tuesday, the North American bird population has declined by 25 percent — 3 billion birds — since 1970.

Carson's warnings are more relevant today than ever.

Although fossil fuels made modern civilization possible, the unintended consequence has been the build up of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Our climate is changing, which threatens life on earth as we



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

“We stand now where two roads diverge. 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.”

- Rachel Carson, 1962

know it.

There are plenty of things we can do right here in Pottstown to protect our planet. We have a sustainability plan adopted by Pottstown Council and the Pottstown School District. Now we need to implement it.

