

Pioneer of the Modern Environmental Movement

Rachel **Carson**



Imagine this: As a child, when other children run away from snakes and spiders, you crouch down to take a closer look. Now you are a marine biologist who becomes concerned about the use of synthetic chemical pesticides after World War II, and you challenge the practices of the agricultural scientists and the government. You call for a change in the way we view the natural world.

Your name is Rachel Carson, and your work starts a worldwide environmental revolution. Your book *Silent Spring* reveals the damage that chemical pesticides such as DDT are doing to our environment and helps set the stage for the US environmental movement of the late twentieth century.

"Most of us walk unseeing through the world."

—Rachel Carson
(1907–1964)



They Stood Alone!

Rachel was born May 27, 1907, the youngest of three children in Springdale, Pennsylvania, where she grew up in a tiny wooden house with no electricity, heat, or plumbing on sixty-five acres of land.

Her mother, Maria McLean Carson, a former school teacher, was an avid reader and shared her knowledge of natural history, botany, and birds, but even more importantly she passed on to Rachel a deep appreciation of the beauty and mystery of the natural world and a lifelong love of nature and all living things.

Not only did Rachel's mother put spiders and other insects out of the house rather than kill them, but also insisted that when her children returned from their woodland adventures with treasures to show her, that they always return the treasures to where they had found them.

From the very beginning Rachel shared her mother's love of nature, and even as a small child, she could recognize a bird by its song and name the different fish in the stream.

She later said, "I can remember no time when I wasn't interested in the out-of-doors and the whole world of nature."⁴⁰

Anna Comstock's popular *Handbook of Nature Study* had brought the nature study movement into the home and classroom, and Maria Carson was the perfect nature-study teacher.

While Rachel's brother and sister were in school, she and her mother spent their time outdoors walking the woods and orchards, exploring the springs, and naming the flowers, birds, and insects. And at night she and her mother hunted for spiders working on webs or moths that ventured out while birds slept.

Rachel's mother encouraged her to use her imagination, and one of Rachel's artistic ventures was a little book of animals she drew and colored herself. The book reflected the

strong relationship that existed between the child author and the wild creatures pictured in her book. She identified all the woodland creatures as her friends.

Her mother had great respect for the written word and read to her children nearly every evening. Rachel also loved to read, and her romantic view of nature was influenced by the children's magazines to which her mother subscribed.

Rachel began submitting stories and essays to her favorite magazine, *St. Nicholas*, which had also adopted the values of the nature study movement.

As more and more of Rachel's work was published, her mother encouraged her literary talent and intellectual development and encouraged her to set academic goals for herself.

Her mother remained her best friend and strongest supporter throughout her life, and later on when Rachel was recognized for her accomplishments both as a scientist and as a writer, she acknowledged that her mother had been the dominant influence in her life.

After her mother's death, Rachel believed her mother resembled Albert Schweitzer in her love of life and all living things.

Because of the family's meager means, school had never been a happy place for Rachel who was teased because of the hand-me-down clothing she wore.

She counted the minutes until she could go home where she could immerse herself in her books, the farm animals, the many dogs, and the outdoors.

But in some ways the Carsons' marginal economic status made it easier for Rachel to be independent since she was under no pressure whatever to conform to the social values of her peers.

By the time she entered high school, she had embraced her

They Stood Alone!

mother's view that intellect and a sense of personal worth were far more important than material possessions or social recognition.

During her last two years of high school, she commuted to a high school across the river where she did make some friends, and where her senior yearbook recognized both her academic skills and her perfectionism.

Determined to be a writer, she entered the Pennsylvania College for Women (now Chatham College), but feeling that she didn't have enough imagination to write fiction, she turned to biology, which always gave her more than enough material for her writing.

She graduated in 1929, then received her master's degree in zoology from Johns Hopkins University in 1932. Limited finances forced her to withdraw from the doctoral program in 1934.

In 1936 she took a job as a writer and marine biologist with the US Bureau of Fisheries (which later became the US Fish and Wildlife Service). Over the next fifteen years she was promoted to staff biologist and editor in chief of all its publications.

Her enthusiasm for nature was matched only by her love of writing and poetry, and her job enabled her to combine both her loves: writing and science.

In 1952 she published her prize-winning book *The Sea Around Us* which told the story of the sea from the earliest times and described everything from the smallest sea creatures to the great underwater mountains in the deepest oceans.

No one had ever told the story of the sea like this, and it won the National Book Award for Nonfiction as well as several other honors. The book remained on the *New York Times* Best Sellers list for eighty-six weeks and was so successful that she was able to retire and become a full-time writer.

Her most important book, *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, was about the use of chemical pesticides, and it changed forev-

er the way people thought about their world. Following four years of research, she had identified the devastating and irrevocable hazards of DDT, one of the most powerful pesticides the world had ever known, and she concluded that DDT should be banned.

Her book caused a firestorm of controversy and helped set the stage for the US environmental movement of the late twentieth century.

Her best-selling book focused public attention on the problem of pesticides and other chemical pollution, and led to such landmark legislation as the US Clean Water Act and the banning of DDT in many countries throughout the world.

DDT was eventually banned in the United States, and many of the ideas we have today about protecting the environment can be traced back to Cranston's book.

During the four years it took for her to complete *Silent Spring*, she was fighting breast cancer and then bone cancer, and she eventually died of cancer April 14, 1964, at the age of fifty-six in her home in Silver Spring, Maryland.

In 1973, nine years after her death, she was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame, and in 1980 she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian honor.

There is currently some controversy about the banning of DDT because of the rise in malaria deaths. The World Health Organization recently estimated that there are between 300 and 500 million cases of malaria annually, resulting in approximately one million deaths—many whose lives could have been saved with the regular application of DDT to their environments.⁴¹

Regardless of the controversy, however, Rachel Carson was a pioneering naturalist who has been called the founder of the

They Stood Alone!

US environmental movement. An award-winning scientist and writer, her book *Silent Spring* started a worldwide environmental revolution. By identifying the devastating and irrevocable hazards of DDT, one of the most powerful pesticides the world has known, she showed how changing one small part of nature can upset the balance of the whole.

Her dedication to the beauty and integrity of life continues to inspire new generations to protect the living world and all its creatures.