
Bugs in Environmentalism

by Alston Chase

The microbes are coming! The microbes are coming!

Last month's scare in Florida, ignited by the discovery of mosquitoes carrying deadly St. Louis encephalitis, highlights an impending public health crisis: Bugs we thought we'd zapped are coming back like a bad dream.

In 1990, a Florida encephalitis outbreak infected 223 people and killed 11. This time, the contaminated mosquitoes were detected before they could infect anyone. But the threat alone was enough to force Disney World to close its swimming pools and provoke statewide pesticide overkill, drenching the state in malathion.

And encephalitis may not be the greatest threat. Worldwide, malaria, once thought under control, is on a deadly rebound. If we're not careful, this disease, that caused more casualties than gunfire during the Civil War, may re-emerge as a major hazard in America.

Why is this scourge coming back? Several reasons: First, many countries falsely supposed the disease was licked and began focusing their resources elsewhere. Second, malarial protozoa and insects that carry it have become resistant to the drugs and pesticides used to control. Third, since most victims are the poor living in non-industrial countries, pharmaceutical companies have little profit-incentive to invest heavily in new drugs.

But there is another factor encouraging this upsurge: misconceived environmentalism.

Malaria is spread by the bite of *Anopheles* mosquitoes. Early in this century, the only effective control was to eliminate stagnant water, where these creatures reproduced, such as swamps and landfills. Then in 1939, the organochlorine pesticide DDT was discovered. This compound proved a godsend in the Third World, curtailing the disease dramatically. By the early 1960s in India, the annual incidence of malaria had declined from a million to 100,000; in Sri Lanka, from 500,000 to 13.

Then in 1962, Rachel Carson's best seller, "Silent Spring," indicted DDT as a killer of birds, fish and other wildlife. Soon, this organochloride was replaced by less persistent organophosphates, such as parathion and malathion.

This was ironic. Even today, no scientific consensus exists on the extent to which DDT poses a danger to other creatures. Yet scholars universally agree it is safe for humans.

By contrast, DDT's replacements, the organophosphates, belong to the same chemical family as nerve gas and are far more dangerous. Their use, wrote one scholar, "caused incidents of serious poisoning among unsuspecting workers and farmers who had been accustomed to handling the relatively non-toxic DDT."

We owe a great debt to Rachel Carson, who made us aware how chemicals might harm the environment. But now, the greater danger we face may be Rachel Carsonism blind faith in her infallibility. Thanks to her influence, most Americans believe all pesticides are dangerous.

As one researcher at the Environmental Protection Agency told me, "We simply cannot find risks associated with these compounds, but the public refuses to believe it"

Call it fear of spraying. In one study, researchers spewed distilled water from planes over residential neighborhoods without telling anyone what the spray contained. The intent was to gauge public phobia of chemicals. And sure enough, the experimenters were soon deluged with complaints from frightened folks who claimed the spray was causing cows to abort, dogs to shed and children to get sick.

Thus, as National Institutes of Health malaria expert Robert Gwadz puts it, "The legacy of Rachel Carson was not altogether positive' " The incidence of malaria in India is now back up to more than a million, and more than 500,000 in Sri Lanka. Yet as Mr. Gwadz explains, "Irrational restrictions on use of pesticides make it more difficult for poorer countries to mount cost-effective programs for vector-borne disease control."

Translated, this means millions of brown and black people may perish because of our hypocrisy. America spends more on pesticides than any other country. Most of this does not go to protect crops, but to make outdoor living easier - to keep bugs down at picnics. Simultaneously, we protect wetlands - the very places that these insects breed. And we pressure underdeveloped countries to forsake chemicals they badly need to protect their citizens.

In 1992, pressure from the United States caused Peru to halt chlorinization of its drinking water, resulting in a major cholera epidemic that killed thousands. Yet, although the World Health Organization has predicted more than 9 million people will die drinking unchlorinated water, U.S. regulators and environmentalists continue to escalate their campaign against chlorine compounds.

Irrational environmentalism therefore looms as a growing threat to world health. And the only cure is a good dose of common sense: By all means, we must protect wildlife habitat and the food supply. But we should also become more sensible about risk and more sensitive to the plight of the world's poor. Not everyone is a paying guest at Disney World.

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