

69. Earth's Green Mantle

RachielCarson

This text is a chapter from the extremely influential book *Silent Spring*. This is a warning against overuse of various kinds of pesticides and insecticides. They not only destroy the intended plants and insects but the entire life on the planet. If the practice of indiscriminate production, supply and use of pesticides and other poisonous chemicals is not controlled the damage of the earth is certain.

The author calls this practice 'bludgeoning' of the landscape by ignorant, stupid people pursuing their own ends without regard to its consequences to nature. All living things on the earth are interdependent: destruction of one implies the destruction others in the broad sense. The author suggests systematic use of natural methods. But our attitude towards plants is narrow: we see immediate utility.

The green plants are the cover of the earth that protect other lives on it. The earth's vegetation is part of a web of life in which there are intimate and essential relations between plants and the earth, between plants and other plants, between plants and animals. Sometimes we have no choice but to disturb these relationships, but we should do so thoughtfully, with full awareness that what we do may have consequences remote in time and place. But today the "weed killer" business is fast growing.

One of the most tragic examples of our unthinking bludgeoning of the landscape is in the sagebrush lands of the West, where a vast campaign is on to destroy the sage and to substitute grasslands. For here the natural landscape is eloquent of the interplay of forces that have created it. It is spread before us like the pages of an open book in which we can read why the land is what it is, and why we should preserve its integrity. But the pages lie unread.

As the landscape evolved, there must have been a long period of trial and error in which plants attempted the colonization of this high and windswept land. One after another must have failed. At last one group of plants evolved which combined all the qualities needed to survive. The sage—low-growing and shrubby—could hold its place on the mountain slopes and on the plains, and within its small gray leaves it could hold moisture enough to defy the thieving winds.

As a result of long ages of experimentation by nature, the great plains of the West became the land of the sage. Along with the plants, animal life, too, was evolving in harmony with the searching requirements of the land. In time there were two as perfectly adjusted to their habitat as the sage. One was a mammal, the fleet and graceful pronghorn antelope. The other was a bird, the sage grouse—the “cock of the plains” of Lewis and Clark.

And other life looks to the sage. Mule deer often feed on it. Sage may mean survival for winter-grazing livestock. Sheep graze many winter ranges where the big sagebrush forms almost pure stands.

On the bitter upland plains, the purple wastes of sage, the wild, swift antelope, and the grouse are then a natural system in perfect balance. Are? The verb must be changed—at least in those already vast and growing areas where man is attempting to improve on nature’s way. In the name of progress the land management agencies have set about to satisfy the insatiable demands of the cattlemen for more grazing land.

The program of sage eradication has been under way for a number of years. Several government agencies are active in it; industry has joined with enthusiasm to promote and encourage an enterprise which creates expanded markets not only

for grass seed but for a large assortment of machines for cutting and plowing and seeding. The newest addition to the weapons is the use of chemical sprays. Now millions of acres of sagebrush lands are sprayed each year.

But even if the program succeeds in its immediate objective, it is clear that the whole closely knit fabric of life has been ripped apart. The antelope and the grouse will disappear along with the sage. The deer will suffer, too, and the land will be poorer for the destruction of the wild things that belong to it. Even the livestock which are the intended beneficiaries will suffer.

Botanists at the Connecticut Arboretum declare that the elimination of beautiful native shrubs and wildflowers has reached the proportions of a “roadside crisis.” Azaleas, mountain laurel, blueberries, huckleberries, viburnums, dogwood, bayberry, sweet fern, low shadbush, winterberry, chokecherry, and wild plum are dying before the chemical barrage. So are the daisies, black-eyed Susans, Queen Anne’s lace, goldenrods, and fall asters which lend grace and beauty to the landscape.