

REL/EVRN 372  
Religion and the Environment in the US

Rachel Carson Documentary Worksheet

*Access:* Please access the documentary through [KU Libraries](#) (click on the “View online” link; if you are off campus, input your KU ID and password). Additional information on the documentary is at [PBS](#). And, if you really love it, you can purchase it through [Amazon!](#)

*Directions:* Please answer each of the following questions in 3-4 sentences. Each question is worth 6 points (so, 30 total). Please note: the answers sometimes unfold only over the course of the entire documentary!

1. What was DDT? What are its origins and how was it used before Carson wrote *Silent Spring*?

Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) is an early synthetic insecticide, first found to be effective in this in the 1930s. It was used heavily in WWII, where it was used extensively to fight insect-borne disease. The overuse of DDT neglected to consider the ecological implications of the destruction of ecosystems where insects are very important. Currently, use of DDT is heavily restricted due to the history of ecological destruction.

2. When did Rachel Carson first see the ocean? How did that experience affect her?

She first saw the ocean after graduate school, where she took a position with the marine biology laboratory in Woods Hole, MA. It was a liberating experience, which opened her to many new ideas. It is suggested that she would have been a marine biologist if not for the Great Depression. This work would directly lead her to a career in writing.

3. In the years before *Silent Spring* was published, what did people believe about the potential of science for good? And, based on the video, how do private and government interests sometimes shape scientific research?

The public notion of mankind was that of above nature, that it existed “for man’s convenience.” This gave little motivation to understand the complexities of ecosystems, and encouraged the destruction of “pests” using DDT, as was thought to be good. Science, in the mid 1900s more than ever, were shaped heavily by the aspiration towards a magic bullet towards every problem, therein research would be shaped by the interest of those who could fund it.

4. How did global events, especially the Cold War, Shape Carson’s career?

The cold war would push nuclear testing to a forefront, and with time the public would begin to see the effects man could have on the environment, such as with radiation poisoning in the Lucky Dragon incident. This would propel Carson to write about it heavily in her work, and she began to write books on the subject.

## 5. What was the “arms race” in pesticide?

The idea that total eradication of pests would become popular in Carson’s time, with global efforts such as the eradication of Malaria being pushed. And, throughout this, the concern for humans was on acute toxicity, as opposed to long-term effects. This would propel Carson to concern, and she would find that resistance to pesticides would be built up quickly, demanding increasing amounts of pesticides be used to kill each, more resistant generation, thereafter poisoning other wildlife.