

Government Driving New Zealand towards our own Silent Spring

In 1962 American marine biologist and author Rachel Carson published a book which became the genesis of a global environmental movement. That book, 'Silent Spring', prompted a new awareness of the interconnected nature of nature, and of how mankind's chemical meddling threatened to destroy the ecological balance, causing widespread deaths and extinctions of wildlife.

The subject of Carson's concern was dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane, or DDT, a broad-spectrum insecticide widely used across the United States and elsewhere.

Rachel's prognosis was bleak; birds would die because of DDT. All types of birds. Birds would die from direct exposure to DDT. Birds would die from eating poisoned insects. Birds would die from increased predation by animals normally kept under control by birds of prey – which were being killed by DDT. Populations of animals and birds relieved of the danger of predation by the deaths of their predators, would flourish out of control, outgrowing their own food supplies. Uncountable millions would die of starvation in the winter time.

Her message was heard. In 1972, then President Richard Nixon recognised that spraying DDT on America's crops to protect them from insects was causing the deaths of predatory birds, including ospreys, peregrine falcons, and even the Bald Eagle, national bird of the United States. The American Government realised that by destroying one type of species in an attempt to control another, the entire balance of the food chain would be upset.

Sanity prevailed, and the root cause of the systemic destruction of American wild bird life was removed from the equation – the use of DDT was banned in the US.

Carson's prophesied Silent Spring – a Spring without birdsong – had been averted.

44 years later, in New Zealand, those lessons seem to have been forgotten. Chemical poisoning of the entire environment, in the misguided pursuit of a number of defined animal pests, is pushing New Zealand towards our very own Silent Spring – but this time the Government itself is part of the equation.

Conservation Minister Maggie Barry, like her predecessor Dr Nick Smith, not only sings the praises of Compound 1080 poison, but appears to hold some very concerning misconceptions, both about the poison itself, and about the long-term environmental effects of its use – indeed the long-term environmental effects of the widespread use of any systemic eco-toxin.

Our Government holds the whip hand on 1080, which is banned throughout most of the world, for the same reasons that DDT was banned in the US. The wholly Government-owned SOE company Animal Control Products is the sole importer of 1080, taking nearly 90% of the total global supply from the only manufacturer of this synthetic chemical poison, Tull Chemicals in Alabama. ACP also owns the factory that makes the baits themselves.

But worse than the apparent inability, or even unwillingness, of Government Ministers to understand the true nature of Compound 1080 poison, is the unworkable folly of the "poisoning the environment in order to save it" theory.

Ms Barry, like Dr Smith, appears inexplicably wedded to the contention that 1080 is plant-based. It is not. Compound 1080 is a synthetic chemical poison made in a factory. Ministers insist that 1080

breaks down in water. This is misleadingly inaccurate – 1080 dissolves and dilutes in water, but the actual breakdown of the toxic part of the molecule can take weeks if not longer. It remains deadly for months on end in the carcasses of poisoned animals, and there is evidence that it is taken up by some plants as well. 1080 enters not only the food chain, but the entire ecosystem. The sub-lethal effects on humans are not fully documented, but it is known to cause reproductive deformities in some animals.

Like DDT, 1080 is a broad-spectrum poison. Like DDT, 1080 was first licenced as an insecticide, and it is known to be deadly to all air-breathing organisms. The agonising death caused by 1080 can take days, especially for larger animals such as deer, horses, and livestock. There is no antidote.

But perhaps the more troubling aspect to this Government's blind, deaf, we-know-everything approach to pest control in this country, is its seeming inability to comprehend the flow-on effects of poisons in the environment.

No part of an ecosystem can be taken in isolation. Sadly, and even perhaps bizarrely, the Government has support for its deadly pollution of our pristine environment from Forest and Bird, and even the Green Party. Of all people, it should be hoped that such self-professed environmentalists would understand the most basic truths of the interconnected nature of nature itself.

Birds are killed directly through eating 1080 poison baits. They are killed through eating insects that have eaten poison baits. They are killed by rats when the stoats and cats that normally control the rats are killed by 1080. They are killed by cats and stoats, when the rats that the cats and stoats normally prey on are killed by 1080. If this sounds depressingly familiar to the situation Rachel Carson foresaw with regards to DDT half a century ago, that's because it is.

The difference this time is that where the US Government saw sense, the New Zealand Government sees only dollar signs. Trapping and other methods of ground-based pest control cost more than aerial poisoning. This is a given.

But how will the cost compare when we wake up one morning to discover that the last kea has died from ingesting 1080 intended for a possum? When the morepork has disappeared from our forests and bush because Government intransigence sees tonnes of deadly broad-spectrum poison dropped over our wilderlands in pursuit of rats? When there are no more falcons to be seen in our skies?

New Zealand's native birds did not evolve without predators, and it is irrational beyond ignorance for anyone to suggest that they did. Ours was an avian world, and they evolved with avian predators. The falcon, the hawk, the owl, the Haast eagle – the greatest eagle the world has ever known. No ecosystem in the world can function without predators. We humans have destroyed that original balance, but now we stand on the brink of causing the greatest preventable ecological blunder of modern times, by our approach to destroying the artificial balance that has replaced it.

44 years on from the demise of DDT, American agriculture continues to thrive. The sky did not fall because a chemical poison became unavailable. American farmers found alternative methods, they used them, and they worked.

The same will prevail here. Ending the use of 1080 will not spell the doom of our precious native birds – rather, it will herald the dawn of their revival. Of the 56 native New Zealand bird species documented to have become extinct since humans first settled these islands, 38 succumbed before Europeans and their mammals arrived; and tellingly, the majority of those now on the endangered

list have gained that dubious status since the early 1960s, shortly after the wide scale use of 1080 poison began.

Battling for our Birds, using the right tools and methods, is laudable and to be supported, and an introduced predator-free New Zealand is a commendable goal even if an impossibly unrealistic one; but the idea that we can somehow poison our forests back to health is madness. It is akin to burning the village in order to save it. New Zealand has to move beyond 1080, without any further delay. To this truth there really is no alternative. If we keep on using this poison in this way, we will bring about our own Silent Spring.

Annually this country spends around \$100 million on aerial 1080 operations, but barely 3% of that amount on researching alternatives. If more effort and resourcing had been put into finding and perfecting other methods, long ago in the nearly 60 years during which we have been experimenting with 1080 – unsuccessfully as a method for eliminating rabbits, possums, rats, stoats, and everything else it has been aimed at, but very destructively as far as the birds and other native species we have been trying to protect are concerned – perhaps today we would not be faced with the imminent extinction of some of our most precious, iconic, and irreplaceable national treasures.

Perhaps also we could have realised the enormous economic potential offered by the possum fur industry; an industry that already employs more than 1500 people and contributes more than \$130 million export dollars to the nation's coffers annually, while at the same time removing designated pest animals from the bush in a completely sustainable and environmentally-friendly manner.

It is still not too late for these alternative approaches. We still have time; enough of it, if we act now, decisively, and with the health of our environment in mind, we can turn adversity into profit, and save our most special species from chemical oblivion at the same time.

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