

Scientist Who Warned Against DDT Ban Dies

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- **inShare**Millions in the third world die from malaria every year in large part because of a virtual ban on the controversial insecticide DDT.

The removal of the unwarranted stigma from DDT and the saving of many future lives is now nearer at hand than it has been in the last 30 years thanks to the efforts of Dr. J. Gordon Edwards, who passed away on July 19 at the age of 85.

Though Dr. Edwards is best known to the general public as the author of the now-classic 1961 book "A Climber's Guide to Glacier National Park," his work as an entomologist and professor at San Jose State University may prove to be his most important legacy.

Dr. Edwards led the opposition to environmental extremist efforts to ban DDT in the wake of Rachel Carson's infamous 1962 book "Silent Spring." The testimony of Dr. Edwards and others during Environmental Protection Agency hearings in 1971 on whether to ban the insecticide led to an EPA administrative law judge ruling that, "DDT is not a carcinogenic hazard to man. DDT is not a mutagenic or teratogenic hazard to man. The uses of DDT under the regulations involved here do not have a deleterious effect on freshwater fish, estuarine organisms, wild birds or other wildlife."

Inexplicably — or so it seemed — DDT was nonetheless banned by EPA administrator William Ruckleshaus. Dr. Edwards investigated and uncovered disturbing statements and troubling connections between Ruckleshaus and anti-DDT environmental extremist groups.

In a May 1971 speech before the Wisconsin Audubon Society, Ruckleshaus acknowledged being a member of the anti-DDT National Audubon Society and to have "streamlined" EPA procedures so that DDT could be banned even before the administrative hearings had been completed.

After Ruckleshaus left the EPA, he began fundraising for the Environmental Defense Fund, a spin-off of the National Audubon Society and the lead petitioner to have EPA ban DDT.

The probability that Ruckleshaus had made up his mind to ban DDT regardless of the facts is increased by his refusal of requests made under the Freedom of Information Act and by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to turn over the documentation on which the ban was based.

Dr. Edwards subsequently got into litigation with the New York Times and Audubon Society over DDT.

Perhaps the most well-known allegation about DDT was that the insecticide supposedly caused declines in the populations of birds such as the bald eagle.

Dr. Edwards knew this was wrong. He knew that these bird populations had declined decades before DDT had ever been used. More importantly, the bird populations were actually rebounding during the years of peak DDT use, according to bird counts.

In an April 1972 edition of American Birds, a National Audubon Society magazine, anti-DDT editor Robert S. Arbib, Jr., accused a "certain paid scientist spokesman" of lying about higher bird counts. No scientists were mentioned by name.

On Aug. 14, 1972, the New York Times recounted Arbib's accusations in a story entitled "Pesticide Spokesman Accused of Lying on Higher Bird Counts." At the urging of the Times' reporter, Arbib named five scientists, including Dr. Edwards.

Dr. Edwards and two others filed suit for libel against the National Audubon Society and the Times. In July 1976, a jury decided that, though the National Audubon Society was not liable, the Times was. The jury found the Times article's statements were clearly libelous and made with "malice."

The verdict against the Times was overturned in May 1977 by Judge Irving Kaufman on the grounds that the newspaper was justified in reporting the charges because they were "newsworthy" and that it did not matter that the Times had serious doubts about their truth.

Kaufman, as it turns out, was also a close personal friend of the then-publisher of the Times, Arthur Ochs Sulzberger.

An interesting by-product of the trial was evidence that discussions had been held at the Environmental Defense Fund concerning ways to silence and discredit the defenders of DDT like Dr. Edwards.

I met Dr. Edwards in the 1990s while researching the DDT controversy. We collaborated in 1999 on the fact sheet "100 Things You Should Know About DDT."

Since then, there have been growing rumblings of a rehabilitation for DDT. Public health professionals and non-governmental organizations, notably Africa Fighting Malaria, stepped up efforts to increase the use of DDT.

Now, even the New York Times has seen the light, running a pro-DDT editorial on Dec. 23, 2002 ("Fighting Malaria with DDT"), a pro-DDT op-ed column on Aug. 7, 2003 (Is there a place for DDT?) and, most recently, a pro-DDT New York Times Magazine article on April 11, 2004. ("What the World Needs Now is DDT").

Dr. Edwards lived long enough to see the New York Times do a "180" on DDT. It's too bad he didn't live long enough to see a more meaningful payoff for his persistence, namely successful malaria control and eradication — and millions of lives saved. It will be up to the rest of us to fulfill Dr. Edwards' legacy.

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