



Section II: Uses of DDT

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Description

An essay about the use of the pesticide DDT after World War II.

Body

Called a 'savior of mankind' because of its efficacy in controlling insect-borne diseases in World War II, DDT was the most widely used of the new chemical insecticides. By stopping the transmittal of typhus through fleas, DDT saved millions of lives during the war. Because of this use of DDT, World War II was the first war in which more people died as a result of casualties than of disease. After the war, there was massive civilian use of this "miracle" substance.

An organic, synthetic insecticide of the chlorinated hydrocarbon group, DDT was popular due to its low cost, high availability, potency, and apparent safety. Most of the DDT sold to the World Health Organization cost less than twenty-two cents per pound. After the war, DDT production skyrocketed. Between 1945 and 1955, production increased from 125 million pounds to 600 million pounds. Because DDT remained in its toxic state for years, farmers could apply the pesticide occasionally yet enjoy its protection for years. The government supported use of DDT; the chemical industry advocated it aggressively. The Public Health Department held demonstrations of DDT's efficacy and safety. As a result of this positive publicity, public places and private backyards were also sprayed.

With the discovery of the housefly's immunity to DDT, serious doubts arose about DDT. As early as 1946, Elmer Higgins and Clarence Cottam wrote about the threat of DDT to mammals, birds, and fish in the *Journal of Economic Entomology*. It was observed that DDT tended to accumulate in the fatty tissues of wildlife. In 1958, Roy Barker of the Illinois Natural History Survey at Urbana published a warning describing how robins were poisoned by eating earthworms that had ingested DDT in leaves under elms sprayed for control of Dutch elm disease. Roland C. Clement, a former vice-president of the National Audubon Society, described the response to Barker's survey as being:

...denied or disregarded by officialdom largely because those in responsibility did not regard such environmental sequelae of direct concern to them, and considered birds as 'things' of minor consequence instead of recognizing them for what they are, sensitive and responsive indices to the health and quality of the total environment, of which man too is a part. Graham, 16

Although Congress started an annual census of fish killed by various pollutants, most people did not know about these disturbing facts. Very few of the facts appeared in newspapers and magazines. The general public, overwhelmed by the praise of pesticides, only knew about the quick, easy benefits.

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Resource Type

Case Study / Scenario