

# SILENT SPRING, AGAIN

Speaking up to protect the voices of the wilderness.



AMY DOMINI

**SILENCE CAN BE A SOURCE OF HEALING, A REFUGE FROM THE** stress of modern life, a pathway to enlightenment. Or it can have a more sinister meaning. ¶ In 1962, Rachel Carson, an accomplished biologist and popular writer, published a book that would change our attitudes toward our planet. *Silent Spring* began on a deceptively peaceful note, in a chapter called "A Fable for Tomorrow." ¶ "There was once a town in the heart of America," Carson wrote, "where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. The

town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms. ... In autumn, oak and maple and birch set up a blaze of colour that flamed and flickered across a backdrop of pines. Then foxes barked in the hills and deer silently crossed the fields, half hidden in the mists of the fall mornings."

But something went wrong in this idyllic town. "There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example—where had they gone? Many people spoke of them, puzzled and disturbed. The feeding stations in the backyards were deserted. The few birds seen anywhere were moribund; they trembled violently and could not fly. It was a spring without voices. On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn choruses of robins, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens and scores of other bird voices there was now no sound; only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh."

Millions of Americans responded to this ominous vision, making *Silent Spring* not only a massive bestseller but one of the most influential books in the country's history. *Silent Spring* provided the impetus for a ban on DDT—a popular pesticide that concentrated in the food chain, wreaking havoc on birds and other wildlife—and inspired a powerful environmental movement, with landmarks that include the founding of the Environmental Defense Fund in 1967 and the first Earth Day in 1970.



Social investors have been an important part of this movement. Outrage over the Exxon Valdez oil spill of 1989 led to the creation of the CERES Principles on environmental practises, and shareholders soon filed resolutions calling on major corporations to adhere to them. A combined effort by shareholder activists and indigenous people persuaded government officials in Québec, Canada, to halt a massive hydroelectric project in 1994. And today, investors are encouraging corporations to

cut their greenhouse gas emissions, protect fragile habitats and buy lumber and paper grown in sustainably managed forests. Recently, investors including my own firm helped convince JPMorgan Chase—a \$1.1 trillion bank with operations in more than 50 countries—to adopt a comprehensive environmental policy.

Yet much work remains to be done. In a chilling reminder that a "silent spring" isn't an outdated threat, biologist Bridget Stutchbury, author of *Silence of the Songbirds*, recently wrote in *The New York Times* that our hunger for out-of-season fruits and vegetables may be killing songbirds in Latin America.

In an effort to meet the demand from North America and Europe for a culinary "endless summer," farmers in countries like Guatemala, Honduras and Ecuador are spraying their crops "heavily and repeatedly with a chemical cocktail of dangerous pesticides," as Stutchbury wrote. "Migratory songbirds like bobolinks, barn swallows and Eastern kingbirds are suffering mysterious population declines," she continued, "and pesticides may well be to blame."

What can we do as consumers, as citizens and as investors? Stutchbury urges us to buy organic coffee and organic bananas, and avoid Latin American crops such as melons, green beans, tomatoes, bell peppers and strawberries, which are rarely organically grown. We can ask our government representatives to ensure that labels like "organic" are strict and meaningful. Or, as we cut into our out-of-season tomatoes, peppers and melons, we can thank the hundreds of songbirds who were permanently silenced to bring that produce to our table. It's our choice.

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