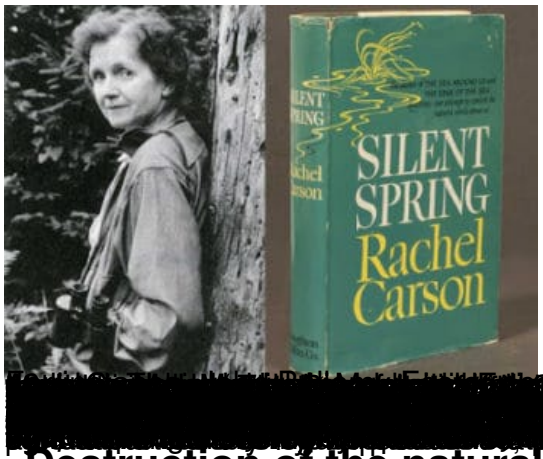
Allen Todd -



Eight years before the first Earth Day in 1970, Rachel Carson was one of the earliest researchers and writers to warn about the growing threats to the natural world in the 20th. C–specifically, she focused on the dangers inherent in the use of organophosphate pesticides by large-scale agri-businesses. As a result of her studies, she concluded that:

"The balance of nature is not the same today as in Pleistocene times, but it is still there: a complex, precise, and highly integrated system of relationships between living things which cannot safely be ignored any more than the law of gravity can be defied with impunity by a [person] perched on the edge of a cliff. The balance of nature is not a status quo; it is fluid, ever shifting, in a constant state of adjustment. [Humans], too, [are] part of this balance."

Since she wrote her ground-breaking book in 1962, it has become frighteningly clear that the 'ecological problem' is now this century's greatest problem, and that the world now faces an existential planetary crisis. In particular, it has become increasingly clear to many that capitalism is ecologically dysfunctional and inherently destructive of biodiversity. However, Rachel Carson was by no means the first to comment on the negative impacts on the natural world which accompanied the growth of industrial capitalism.



Destruction of the natural world

One of those to have made clear how capitalist agriculture is environmentally irrational and unsustainable is Fred Magdoff. In a 2015 article: monthlyreview.org

He focused on a range of negative impacts concerning agriculture in the U.S.–but many of his comments about capitalist agriculture's impacts on ecosystems are applicable globally:

"There is loss of biodiversity as native plant species are eradicated to grow the crops desired for sale in the market The loss of habitat for diverse species means that there is also a loss of natural control mechanisms…All of the common decisions and practices in the agricultural system…[are rational] only from the very narrow perspective of trying to make profits within a capitalist system."

Of the many negative impacts of global capitalist agriculture (apart from its high emissions of greenhouse gases), one of the most dramatic is related to land use, deforestation and biodiversity/species loss–which is particularly marked in the Amazonian rainforest. This acts as the 'lungs' of the planet, and is an essential part of Earth's ecological equilibrium. In the last 50 years or so, one third of the world's woodland has been destroyed. As pointed out by Ian Angus:

"Most of the land now being converted to agriculture was formerly tropical forest, so…tropical forest loss continues to accelerate. This is a huge factor in the current ecological crises: Brazil's tropical rain forests are disappearing at an alarming rate, cut down or burnt to create

short-term grazing land for cattle to produce quick profits for big landowners."



Much of the destruction of such important natural habitats is connected to the global meat and dairy industries. These need, at the very least, to be drastically reduced, if we are to create sustainable agro-ecosystems that work for people instead of for corporate profits.

Just how much biodiversity loss has been taking place because of capitalist agriculture–as well as global warming–was shown by Elizabeth Kolbert. In her book, *The Sixth Extinction: A Unnatural History* , she wrote about what is known as the 'Sixth Extinction', and to 'background extinction' rates. The normal 'background extinction' rate of mammal species is 0.25 per-million species-years. As she points out:

"This means that, since there are about fifty-five hundred mammal species wandering around today, at the background extinction rate you'd expect–once again, very roughly–one species to disappear every seven hundred years."

However, the current rate of species loss shows the earth is undergoing its Sixth Mass Extinction–the first to be driven specifically by human activities. Because of the combination of global warming, one group of scientists in 2004 estimated that, by 2050, anything from 13% to 32% of all species could be lost–with an average of 24% of all species heading towards extinction. Whilst different studies have produced varying figures, the general consensus is that the species extinction rate is the highest in 65 million years–with an extinction rate 1000 times greater than the natural 'background extinction' rate.



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https://mronline.org/2020/05/07/capitalism-and-nature-a-really-inconvenient-truth/