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Bellingham woman is a warrior against pesticides, an advocate for nature

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Lorrie Otto, 90, formerly of Wisconsin, now lives with her daughter in Bellingham.

Whether it's for the now almost common sight of a bald eagle in Seattle or a Web site advocating planting native species in the backyard, Northwesterners are beholding to Lorrie Otto, now a 90-year-old Bellingham woman, whose name is no longer familiar in environmental circles, but who was at the heart of the fight against...

By [Nancy Bartley](#)

BELLINGHAM — To Lorrie Otto, the manicured expanse of green surrounding most homes is the root of environmental evil she's spent decades trying to stamp out.

“Lawns are unpatriotic,” she says, and bad for insects. “We should watch and care for those that are the smallest and the closest to you. We must keep all things healthy and diverse. We have to care.

“We have to care all the time.”

It's more than just a passing thought for Otto, now 90 and retired to her daughter's home in Bellingham. Although Otto is no longer a familiar name in environmental circles, turn back the clock four or five decades, before the champions of things we now take for granted faded from the headlines.

Otto was a mother of two known in her Bayside, Wis., neighborhood as the "Nature Lady," because she gave tours of a local ravine and fought her village and neighbors over her choice of natural landscaping. But her reach extended far past Wisconsin.

She has been called a catalyst for the DDT ban in the United States, and she helped to begin Environmental Defense Fund.

Otto became a regular on national radio shows, gave countless interviews, wrote numerous articles. Her naturally landscaped garden was featured in Martha Stewart Living and was included in the book "The American Woman's Garden," which featured mostly lavish estate gardens.

She founded Wild Ones, a natural-landscaping advocacy group in Wisconsin, of which she's still a board member. And she continues to be an advocate for natural landscaping and protecting the Earth.

Whether it's for the now almost-common sight of a bald eagle in Seattle or a Web site advocating planting native species in the backyard, Northwesterners are beholden to Otto.

Charles Wurster, a founding trustee of Environmental Defense Fund, summed up Otto's environmental career this way: "The lawn police would come around and get after her. Eventually she became a national figure on behalf of all sorts of conservation causes."

Over the years, Otto has received accolades from National Audubon Society, National Wildlife Federation and dozens of conservation societies, garden clubs and elected officials. Former Vice President Al Gore sent a letter of praise for her work.

Otto dismisses the applause as unimportant.

Farmer's daughter

Otto grew up a farmer's daughter in Wisconsin, where she learned to appreciate the rich life in the soil. She studied science at University of Wisconsin, and following World War II she lived with her husband in Portland, Ore.

It was after the couple returned to Wisconsin that she began her battle with the “lawn police” when she decided to turn her yard into a prairie, a natural habitat for insects.

One day she was folding laundry when a work crew arrived and mowed part of her yard. After she explained the importance of every flower, and what insects lived there, she received a settlement from Bayside, she says. It was in her capacity as Nature Lady in Bayside that the hazards of DDT struck her, she says. The village first sprayed for mosquitoes and later sprayed with a helicopter to kill the beetle destroying the elm trees.

Otto closes her eyes at the memory of collecting dead and dying robins by the basketful. They were victims of the DDT, which had been approved for commercial use little more than a decade before.

“What do you want, trees or birds?” asked the village employee responsible for the spraying that day.

“It was terrible. Just terrible,” Otto says. “I lost everything: the frogs, the salamanders, the herons, the snakes.”

She appeared at a village meeting, and when she expressed her concern, she recalled, a man shouted, “Young lady, keep your mouth shut or this will reverberate all the way to the halls of Congress.”

Otto had no intention of being quiet and only intensified her fight, contacting legislators and anyone else who would listen, sometimes carrying dead birds or a bat in her purse to illustrate her point.

The arguments she heard in favor of continued use of DDT stunned her: Its proponents argued it was so safe it could be drunk by humans.

The pesticide was sprayed throughout rural communities, including in Eastern Washington. John Browne of Washington Native Plant Society recalls, as a child, “running in a cloud of DDT behind the Jeep-mounted sprayer with other children on summer afternoons ... a cloud so thick that one couldn’t see one’s hand at arm’s length” and hearing “laughter and screams of invisible children on all sides.”

When Rachel Carson’s book “Silent Spring” came out in 1962, documenting the damage chemical pesticides did to birds’ eggs and criticizing government officials for

unquestioningly accepting chemical-company propaganda, Otto's campaign against DDT got a boost.

"When my husband came home with a New Yorker under his arm and said they were serializing 'Silent Spring,' I remember dancing around the house thinking: Now everyone will know about DDT," Otto said.

A powerful ally

Otto later won a powerful ally in Charles Wurster, a young scientist at Stony Brook University in New York, who now lives in Seattle.

Wurster and his colleagues had a freezer full of avian casualties and found DDT was killing bald eagles, peregrine falcons and osprey. They went to court in New York and later in Michigan.

Otto read about the group and invited them to Milwaukee. They met in her living room and planned a lawsuit against Wisconsin's Department of Natural Resources.

"We were looking for trouble anyway," Wurster says. "She had friends all over the place. She got us put up at her friend's house. They fed us, and we had a typing pool. We were flying in witnesses, and they all had to be fed and housed. We got the famous ornithologist Joe Hickey.

"The University of Wisconsin did research for us. Others raised money. She got it started. She was the spark. We supplied the science and the law, and she did the rest."

Without Otto's organizational skills, that group — which became the influential, nonprofit Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) — would not have been possible, says Wurster.

When the group persuaded a Wisconsin hearing examiner to ban DDT, that state became one of the first in the U.S. to take such action. It was a victory that reverberated across the country.

What began with a meeting in Otto's living room ended in 1972, when William Ruckelshaus, the first director of the Environmental Protection Agency, banned DDT.

Years later, the ban would be credited as one of the main reasons for the resurgence of the eagle population, which had declined from about 10,000 nesting pairs in about

1940, to 450 in the mid-1960s. Today, says Wurster, the eagle is again almost at 10,000 nesting pairs.

Otto recalls standing in her living room at home shortly after DDT was banned in Wisconsin, stunned at what she'd been able to accomplish.

“I was just one person,” she says. “Yet, I was the catalyst.”

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