

Lessons from the Historic Banning of DDT

Wisconsin citizens spurred the banning of the deadly pesticide 50 years ago

BY VIRGINIA SMALL NOV. 20, 2018 2:50 P.M.

Five decades ago, songbirds were dying by the dozens, eagles were vanishing, and humans were endangered by eating fish contaminated by the pesticide DDT. While many considered DDT a miracle chemical, others suspected it was a wanton destroyer. Then, a small band of well-organized Wisconsin activists, collaborating with far-flung scientists, put DDT on trial. That environmental battle had far-reaching impacts—and still-relevant lessons.

Concerns about DDT (dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane) got a well-publicized hearing before Wisconsin's Department of Natural Resources examiner. That's because state law allowed citizens to request such a hearing—a byproduct of Wisconsin's progressive tradition—and still does. Activists sought a determination about whether DDT was causing water pollution and harming fish, birds and humans. Testimony began on Dec. 2, 1968 and continued for six months. Hearing examiner Maurice Van Susteren finally ruled in May 1970 that DDT was indeed polluting state waters. By then, Michigan was the first state to ban DDT, and Wisconsin had followed suit. A federal ban went into effect in 1972.

This was the first nationally publicized case argued by the nonprofit Environmental Defense Fund (EDF). Scientists from across the U.S. and beyond presented testimony. Joseph Hickey, a University of Wisconsin wildlife and ecology professor, was among scientists who risked their



careers by opposing what they considered a grave ecological threat. The stakes were high. The ubiquitous pesticide was valued in agriculture and for treating Dutch elm disease, a scourge felling venerable trees nationwide. Wisconsin's Department of Agriculture strongly advocated for DDT's continued use. The hearing attracted widespread attention, in large measure due to the Madison-based *Capital Times*.

A Ringleader from Milwaukee County

Lorrie Otto of Bayside became the most vocal, visible and dedicated of Wisconsin's DDT opponents. She had read Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, the trailblazing 1962 bestseller warning that pesticides could be wreaking havoc with the intricate web of life. When Otto found dead songbirds, she saved that evidence in her freezer. Otto became a tenacious organizer and coalition builder. In his book, *Banning DDT: How Citizen Activists in Wisconsin Led the Way*, Bill Berry calls Otto "the heart and soul of the DDT battles in Wisconsin."

Another Milwaukeean, Frederick Ott, also played a crucial, though behind-the-scenes, role. The business leader and long-time conservationist raised funds to underwrite the hearing efforts, including expenses to host out-of-town experts. Also, Victor Yannacone, whom Berry calls a "brilliant and flamboyant attorney," came to Wisconsin from New York to represent citizens. He told Berry that "Wisconsin was one of the few places where that hearing could have taken place...The political climate there was right for it."



Otto recalled being a shy homemaker when she began opposing DDT; she gradually became emboldened. She joined Citizens Natural Resources Association (CNRA) and began corresponding with scientists and poring over their research, some of which remained top secret to avoid jeopardizing the scientists' careers.

Mending the Earth in Milwaukee, a 2015 book about natural landscaping by Ney Tait Fraser, recounts Otto's advocacy in her own words: "My concern about DDT started when it was sprayed for mosquitoes. Very rapidly, it escalated to spraying elm trees. People stood on the ground shooting hoses of DDT up in the air." Soon, DDT was sprayed from helicopters, and "people were warned that they should cover birdbaths and put cars in the garage because of spray damaging the finish of cars and getting on windshields."

Otto told Fraser: "The robins did not sing. If you saw any robins at all, they would be in convulsions on the edge of lawns beating their wings against the grass...We had 63 eagles' nests around Lake Michigan, then there were only three. Eagles were not able to produce young because eggshells were thin or missing completely. All the rivers, lakes and waters in Wisconsin were tested, including Lake Michigan. DDT was present in *every* fish tested. One summer, there were reports of high concentrations of DDT in Lake Michigan's chubs. Seagulls regurgitated food contaminated with DDT into their young offspring.



Advisories were sent out to warn people against eating fish. Clearly, DDT was going up the food chain. Here, we were spraying trees to kill an insect, and we were killing birds and fish.”

At Bayside village meetings, Otto requested that DDT spraying end. “The newspaper would report that ‘bird lovers’ were at the village meeting. When I showed them a basket of dead robins, officials said, “Waddayawant? Birds or trees? The agriculture people made you think that the entire economy would collapse if DDT was banned. All the cabbage leaves would turn to lace. We would destroy the canning industry. The tourist industry would collapse.”

Otto and other citizens failed to get Wisconsin’s legislature to ban DDT spraying. So, she flew to New York to meet with scientists and an attorney who were going to court to try to stop DDT spraying against mosquitoes on Long Island. She asked them to come to Wisconsin, which they did. Then, she helped organize transportation, housing and food for the many visiting experts and drove to Madison each day the issue was heard. Before Otto died in 2010 at age 90, she was named to the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame in Stevens Point—along with Joseph Hickey, Democratic Sen. Gaylord Nelson and several other DDT activists.



Takeaways for Today

Milwaukeean Whitney Gould, who covered the DDT hearings for the *Capital Times*, shared insights about the landmark case's continuing relevance. "Environmental protection works," she said. "The successful effort to ban DDT led directly to the return of the bald eagle, the peregrine falcon and the brown pelican—three species that had been pushed to the brink of extinction by reproductive failures caused by DDT [specifically, DDT disrupted the birds' calcium-producing mechanism, leading to thin eggshells]. A more current example is the shrinking of the ominous hole in the ozone layer, thanks to the banning of chlorofluorocarbons."

Gould also cited the triumph of science. "Scientists who gathered in Wisconsin—wildlife ecologists, pharmacologists, chemists, biologists and others—showed how careful research can be integrated into a compelling narrative that leads to thoughtful, targeted public policy. There was plenty of spirited rhetoric, but no hysteria, no fearmongering, no 'fake news.'"

Lastly, Gould said that citizen activism pays off. "The activists who mobilized against DDT were a remarkable mix of bird lovers, university professors, politically savvy organizers and keenly observant ordinary people. With the help of some brilliant lawyers, they conceived the strategy that would eventually outlaw DDT as a water pollutant under Wisconsin statutes. Long before the days of social media and the Internet, they also got the word out to the broader environmental community and opened their homes to the scientists and lawyers who converged here. The well-funded agricultural chemical industry was outsmarted, out-organized and humbled."



Gould added, “If anything, the rise of the #MeToo Movement, blogging and social media has made it easier to mobilize concerned citizens around fraught issues. When people despair about the state of the environment, they can think back to what happened with DDT.”

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