

# An Ode to Federal Bureaucrats

## CONNECTIONS: The Pulse and Politics of the Environment, Peace, and Justice



**Bob Musil, President, Rachel Carson Council**

“In nature nothing exists alone.”

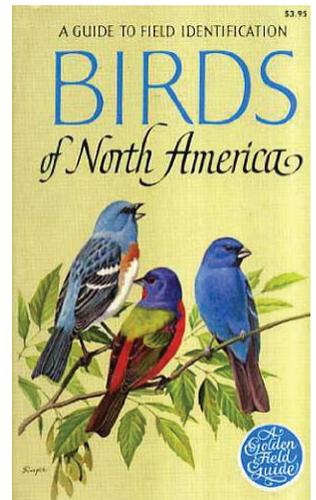
“The aim of science is to discover and illuminate truth. And that, I take it, is the aim of literature, whether biography or history... It seems to me, then, that there can be no separate literature of science.”

“If the Bill of Rights contains no guarantee that a citizen shall be secure against lethal poisons distributed either by private individuals or by public officials, it is surely only because our forefathers, despite their considerable wisdom and foresight, could conceive of no such problem.”

— Rachel Carson

I am one of those unusual fellows who keeps a life list of every bird species I have ever seen. I am a birder, the manly, sporting name that has replaced the old-fashioned and much maligned “bird watcher” – those with sensible shoes and effete sensibilities. My life list used to be kept alongside the birds shown in the *Golden Guide to Birds*, by Chandler Robbins, et. al. It was first published in 1966 with a tan cover featuring a blue-bird, an indigo bunting, and a painted bunting. I loved it immediately and it soon challenged the then reigning champion of bird guide authors — Roger Tory Petersen.

Sadly, my *Golden Guide* and my life list were both lost in a wetland when that pocket-sized paperback slipped out of my fancy Audubon leather holster and disappeared into the muck forever. I slowly and painfully recreated my life list and have used other bird guides since. But I still miss that book and ornithologist [Dr. Chandler Robbins](#). I am indebted to him in more ways than one.



*Chandler Robbins, Ph.D. birding*



*Chandler Robbins, Ph.D. at Patuxent Wildlife Refuge*

Chan, as he was called by those who knew him, died this spring at age 98. He should be better known than he is. Robbins helped inspire a generation of birders and invented the National American Breeding Bird Survey, a nationwide effort of volunteer, citizen scientists who annually note all the birds they observe at a particular time and place.

When pooled, their data is one of the prime sources of how we know whether bird species are declining, or threatened, and what we might do about it to preserve them and the habitats we all depend upon.

Chan Robbins was also friends with Rachel Carson. Both worked for the same federal agency. Both served on the Board of Directors of the Audubon Naturalist Society and at times went birding together. But, I am ahead of my story.



*Gina Solomon, M.D.,  
M.P.H*

I was prompted to reflect on the value of environmental scientists and the important, if often obscure, work they do at various federal agencies as I seethed for weeks over President Donald Trump's removal of 38 science advisers to the EPA. One, [Gina Solomon, M.D., M.P.H.](#), was a friend and colleague in environmental health when I led Physicians for Social Responsibility. She later worked at the Natural Resources Defense Council and now serves as the Deputy Director for Environment and Health at the California EPA and teaches at the elite University of California-San Francisco Medical School.

Another, [Elena Craft, Ph.D.](#), an expert on environmental health, works as a senior scientist in the Texas office of the Environmental Defense Fund which I partnered with in a coalition working on air quality on the U.S. Mexican border. When her position was eliminated, she spoke out against the short-sightedness of the Trump cuts of free and independent scientific expertise.



*Joel Clement*

Most recently, ecologist [Joel Clement](#), director of the Office of Policy Analysis at the U.S. Interior Department was taken out of his position for speaking publicly, at the UN and elsewhere, about the dangers to native Alaskans from global climate change. Clement was hustled off to an inconsequential slot, unrelated to his expertise, as senior adviser at the department's Office of Natural Resources Revenue. He now collects revenue checks from fossil fuel companies. Clement refused to remain silent. He told the media, "I am not a member of the deep state. I am not big government. I am a scientist, a policy expert, a civil servant and a

worried citizen. Reluctantly, as of today, I am also a whistleblower on an administration that chooses silence over science."

These scientists and other specialists working with and in the Federal government are essential to American's health, well-being, and even national security. Their plight was predictable to anyone who understood that Donald Trump's vow before the election to "drain the swamp" of Washington meant simply to find, reduce, or remove those members of the federal workforce who might challenge his agenda of aiding the rich, allowing the poor to suffer, and producing dirty, fossil fuel-driven energy regardless of the consequences to the environment, American citizens or the planet.



*Rachel Carson at  
microscope. 1951*



*Elena Craft, Ph.D.*

Bombarded by decades of anti-government rhetoric and actions from the right since at least the time of Ronald Reagan, many Americans know little about what the Federal government does to protect the economy, enhance trade, help the elderly and the poor, provide medical care and funding, maintain highways, support education and research, and much, much more. And, unfortunately, they know even less about the agencies and professionals dedicated to using science, policy, and public communications to protect the environment and public health.

It took a century of steady reforms to create a professional federal work force that is meant to put the public interest first, be immune from partisan politics, and, most importantly, be chosen on the basis of merit and be free from retaliation from whichever President happens to be in power. That is why many of the abuses of power that led to the impeachment and resignation of Richard Nixon took the form of his attempting to use Federal agencies for his own narrow political ends and to cover up his misdeeds.

Rachel Carson wrote clearly and publicly about such politicized attacks on science and federal environmental workers as early as the Eisenhower Administration. President Eisenhower, unlike his vanquished Democratic opponent, Adlai Stevenson, was no friend to the environment (or conservation, as it was then called). His administration set out to weaken and repeal many of the environmental protections then in place that had been implemented mainly under Presidents Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt. Ike appointed Oregon businessman Douglas McKay to head the Interior Department. McKay quickly dismissed Albert M. Day, a leading conservationist, as head of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Rachel Carson had been able to leave government service at the USFWS in 1951 as a result of her immensely best-selling book *The Sea Around Us*. Here is what Carson said to the *Washington Post* in an item that went viral for the time; it was distributed nationally by the Associated Press and then reprinted in the popular *Reader's Digest*. "The recent dismissal of Mr. Albert Day as director of the Fish and Wildlife Service is the most recent in a series of events that should be deeply disturbing to every thoughtful citizen....These actions strongly suggest that the way is being cleared for a raid upon our natural resources that is without parallel in the present century."

Rachel Carson was in a position to know the devastating impact such attacks on government science and the environment would have. Carson had reviewed and edited most of the environmental science work coming out of the government in her position with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It is why she was aware of early studies and reports on global climate change, the biological effects of nuclear weapons, and, of course, the pesticide DDT. DDT had been welcomed as a miracle pesticide spray in World War II; it saved many, many thousands of lives from malaria among U.S. troops in the South Pacific and from typhus among U.S. troops and civilians in Italy.

But while Carson was stationed with the USFWS in Baltimore, and later Washington, she visited and talked with scientists at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Maryland and edited their reports. They had been studying DDT and discovered that it could have long-range health effects on both wildlife and humans. Among those involved was her friend, Chan Robbins. This research and early environmental and health concerns about DDT ultimately led to Carson's best-selling book, *Silent Spring*, published in 1962. It, along with Carson, her friends and colleagues, and the main environmental organizations of the time, gave rise to the modern environmental movement. But it was government research that was the stimulus for the earliest pushes toward an environmental department, the regulation of toxic chemicals, and concern about global climate change.



Mary Sears, Ph.D.

But there is even more in this history to appreciate about government scientists and how their labor, carried out in obscurity and with comparatively little compensation, has helped every American alive today. Carson's writing on the oceans, for example, stems from government research including the work of unsung women like [Dr. Mary Sears](#), a U.S. Navy Lieutenant Commander during WW II. Sears was in charge of the oceanographic research that explored the previous unknown ocean floor, currents, topography and more. Meanwhile, the DDT researchers at Patuxent included [Dr. Lucille Stickel](#) who, with colleagues in 1946, wrote five major articles on the subject in the *Journal of Wildlife Management*. Stickel later became Director of the contaminant program at Patuxent.



Lucille Stickel, Ph.D.

It was Rachel Carson who wrote the first agency press releases in 1945 containing early warnings of the possible dangers of DDT. Yet Carson's real genius was to review and understand the complex findings of specialists like Robbins, Sears, Stickel, and many others and translate them into popular publications for the public and policy makers. There would be no clean air, clean water, restrictions on toxic chemicals, or efforts to prevent catastrophic global climate change without Carson and without these unknown and unsung heroes of American environmental health – Federal bureaucrats all.

President Donald Trump and his right-wing allies in Congress and corporations seem to understand this better than the average citizen. Otherwise, they would not be busily trying to destroy such a proud heritage, dating to Teddy Roosevelt, or be reaching deep down into the federal bureaucracy to find and silence such valuable scientists and dedicated public servants.



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