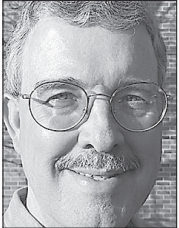


from the director | jim detjen

Breaking the 'Silence'

Dying robins at MSU helped spark modern environmental movement



Jim Detjen is a professor and director of the Knight Center for Environmental Journalism at Michigan State University. He is the founding president of the Society of Environmental Journalists and was president of the International Federation of Environmental Journalists from 1994 to 2000.

On a table at the MSU Museum lies the remains of five robins that were collected by professor George J. Wallace and his colleagues in Michigan State University's zoology department half a century ago. One bird with a reddish brown breast is labeled "collected for DDT." Another is marked with the words "tremors."

The small birds were brought out of the museum's collection to show students in the health and science writing class I taught this fall. Compared to the emperor penguins and the bald eagles in the museum's collections, the robins were unimpressive, indeed.

But in terms of their impact on society and modern life, their significance is profound.

For it was in the spring of 1955 that Wallace first noticed a troubling sign. While walking on the 185-acre North Campus of MSU, he noticed that robins were dying.

In a summary called the "History of dead and dying robins" at MSU, he reported the following:

- "Tremoring robin (female) from near Phillips Hall brought to office by students at 4 p.m. ... Died a few hours later."
- "Sick robin at Administration building."
- "Tremoring robin picked up near President's house at 9 a.m. Died in my office at about 10 a.m."

In the January-February 1959 issue of Audubon Magazine, he wrote, "We first noticed robins dying in the spring of 1955 ... The die-off of robins continued each spring, on a scale sufficient to attract the unsolicited attention of the staff and students at Michigan State University, until by the summer of 1958, the elimination of robins from the main campus and some parts of East Lansing was virtually complete."

The reports by Professor Wallace in the late 1950s were among the first to link the deaths of robins and other

birds to the pesticide DDT, which was used at MSU to fight elm bark beetles and mosquitoes. Earthworms ate fallen leaves and accumulated the pesticide in their bodies. When the robins ate the earthworms, they accumulated DDT and died.

"The robins were dying of insecticidal poisoning; they invariably exhibited the well-known symptoms of loss of balance, followed by tremors, convulsions and death," Wallace wrote.

It was not just robins that were affected. The populations of blue jays, flickers, thrashers, catbirds, grackles, cowbirds and other species had also declined at MSU and in East Lansing, although not as much as robins.

Wallace's findings were cited in detail in "Silent Spring," the landmark book by Rachel Carson that was published in 1962. It is hard to overstate the significance of this book: It is widely credited with launching the birth of both American and international environmental movements in the 1960s.

"'Silent Spring' brought such terms as 'ecology,' 'interdependence,' and 'balance of nature,' into common usage," wrote Arlene Quaratiello in "Rachel Carson: A Biography."

"Whereas every other book published about chemical pesticides before 'Silent Spring' focused on the economic rather than ecological impact that they have had and mostly advocated their unrestricted use to aid in agriculture, Carson focused on the environmental ramifications," Quaratiello wrote.

Her book became an overnight best seller and caused widespread public debate. President John F. Kennedy ordered his Science Advisory Committee to review her book's allegations, and it largely vindicated her conclusions.

As a result of her book, citizens formed local organizations to fight aerial pesticide spraying in their com-

munities. Several national environmental groups, such as the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Environmental Defense Fund were soon established.

The furor caused by her book led to the ban on the use of DDT and other pesticides in the United States and other countries.

Many historians argue that her book laid the groundwork for the first Earth Day in 1970, the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency and the passage of landmark environmental legislation such as the federal Environmental Pesticide Control Act, the Clean Air Act and the Safe Drinking Water Act.

Much as Tom Paine's "Common Sense" galvanized colonialists to fight for American independence and Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin" roused opposition to slavery, Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" convinced people of the importance of protecting the environment.

In 1999, a panel of journalists and historians at New York University ranked "Silent Spring" as the second most important work of journalism in the 20th Century. (John Hersey's "Hiroshima," published in 1946, ranked first and Bob Woodward's and Carl Bernstein's investigation of the Watergate break in The Washington Post ranked third.)

Former Vice President Al Gore has written that Carson's book "came as a cry in the wilderness, a deeply felt, thoroughly researched and brilliantly written argument that changed the course of history. Without this book, the environmental movement might have been long delayed — or never existed at all."

And if it were not for the discovery of some sick and dying robins on the MSU campus 50 years ago, Rachel Carson would have lacked vital evidence to buttress the arguments in "Silent Spring," a book that changed the course of history.