Is the NYTimes reverting to the bad old days of DDT denial?

By ACSH Staff — December 13, 2013

Over the 51 years since Rachel Carson’s poetic attack on DDT in her Silent Spring novel, the chemical pesticide became the poster child for the nascent environmental movement’s inchoate wrath. The victims: millions of African and Asian children and pregnant women who succumbed to malaria in the absence of DDT. (Note: the discoverer of DDT’s potent insecticidal prowess, Dr. Paul Mueller, won the Nobel Prize in Medicine for his discovery).

However, over the past decade, when the toll of malaria seemed to be ever-increasing at a rate of one-million dead each year, and the actual studies of DDT continued to show no evidence of harm to humans, animals or the environment at small levels of exposure, most scientists free of immersion in the anti-DDT fringe came around to accepting its highly effective power against the death-dealing anopheles mosquito.

Why, even the New York Times granted its benefits in fighting malaria in sub-Saharan Africa, appropriately around Christmas time in 2002: Fighting Malaria with DDT [1].

Today, malaria control relies mainly on insecticide-treated bed nets and drugs, most of which have lost effectiveness as malaria grows resistant. DDT, which is sprayed on the inside walls of houses twice a year, is used in only about 24 countries. Wealthy nations that banned DDT at home will not pay for its use elsewhere. But the poorest nations depend on such donations. America used DDT to eradicate malaria, as did southern Europe and India. Very little DDT is needed to spray houses twice a year. The evidence about DDT’s effects on humans is inconclusive. The uncertainties must be weighed against a demonstrated effectiveness in fighting a disease that now kills 1 in 20 African children.

Yet, their recent editorial [2] (The Toll From Three Deadly Diseases) has only this to say about the means to fight malaria:

The main weapons against malaria are insecticide-treated bed nets to ward off mosquitoes and drugs for those who become ill. In sub-Saharan Africa, much less than half of the population had access to nets this year, and millions lack access to tests and drug treatments.
Have the editors at *The Times* decided that they went out too far on a limb from their anti-chemical, anti-DDT base? What other explanation can there be for their failure to take note of this simple, safe, cheap and most of all, effective protective agent against malaria?