The History of Pest Control

By Vernon Stent

The application of pest control ranges from do-it-yourself arrangements to scientific and very precise deployment of chemicals and predatory insects by highly skilled practitioners. Despite the fact that pest control is a world-wide industry it is still dominated by family or 1-person businesses. Those that need to control pests range from householders to large scale agri-conglomerates who need to maximise their yield. In between these two are restaurants, bars, food production facilities, farmers - in fact, anybody that routinely deal with food. Pest control can make us more comfortable - but can also save lives.

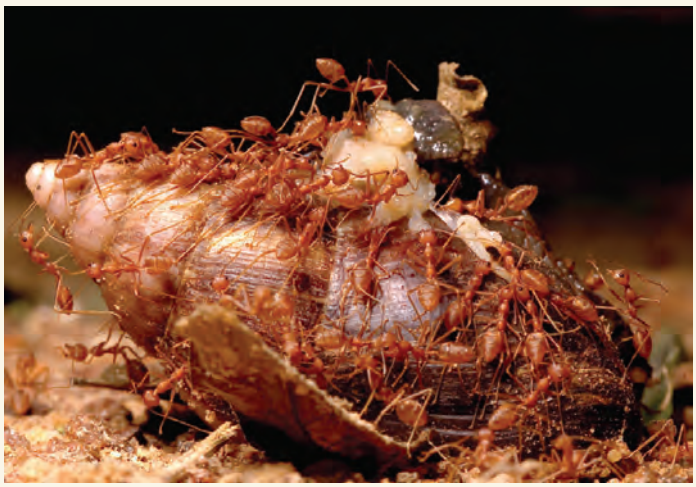
The word pest is subjective as one man's pest may be another man's helper. For instance, pest A may be a threat to crop A, and pest B a threat to crop B. However, if pest B is a natural predator to pest A, then the farmer who wishes to protect crop A may cultivate and release pest B amongst his crops. There is a theory that without man's intervention in the food chain through agriculture, hunting and long distance travel there would be no pests. The theory continues that man's intervention (for instance, in cultivating and releasing pest B, or in carrying creatures long distances) has upset the balance of the food chain, producing instability in insect and other animal numbers and distorting their evolution. This instability has led to over-population of a given species with the result that they have become pests. Having said this, if we assume that the very first fly swat was the first instance of pest control - and we know that large animals swat flies - it could be argued that pest control dates back way before humans came on the scene.

The first recorded instance of pest control takes us back to 2500BC when the Sumerians used sulphur to control insects. Then around 1200BC the Chinese, in their great age of discovery towards the end of the Shang Dynasty, were using chemicals to control insects. The Chinese continued to develop ever more sophisticated chemicals and methods of controlling insects for crops and for people's comfort.

No doubt the spread of pest control know-how was helped by the advanced state of Chinese writing ability. Although progress in pest control methods undoubtedly continued, the next significant scrap of evidence does not come until around 750BC when Homer described the Greek use of wood ash spread on land as a form of pest control.

Around 500BC the Chinese were using mercury and arsenic compounds as a means to control body lice, a common problem throughout history. In 440BC the Ancient Egyptian's used fishing nets to cover their beds or their homes at night as a protection from mosquitoes.

From 300BC there is evidence of the use of use of predatory insects to control pests, although this method was almost certainly developed before this date.



Red weaver ants, here feeding on a snail, have been used to control pests in China, Southeast Asia and Africa for many centuries.

The Romans developed pest control methods and these ideas were spread throughout the empire. In 200BC, Roman censor Cato encouraged the use of oils as a means of pest control and in 70AD Pliny the Elder wrote that galbanum resin (from the fennel plant) should be added to sulphur in order to discourage mosquitoes. In 13BC the first recorded rat-proof grain store was built by the Romans.

The first known instance where predatory insects were transported from one area to another comes from Arabia around 1000AD where date growers moved cultures of ants from neighboring mountains to their oasis plantations in order to prey on phytophagous ants which attacked date palm.

Despite the enlightenment provided by the ancient Chinese, Arabs and Romans, many of their teachings did not pass down though time. Certainly in Europe during the dark ages, methods of pest control were just as likely to be based on superstition and local spiritual rituals as any proven method. Pests were often seen as workers of evil - especially those that ruined food, crops or livestock.

Although there were undoubtedly studies of pests during the dark ages, we do not have any recorded evidence of this.

It is not until the European renaissance when more evidence of pest control emerges. In 1758 the great Swedish botanist and taxonomist Carolus Linnaeus catalogued and named many pests. His writings were (and remain) the root and source of future study into pests (as well as plants and animals generally). At the same time, the agricultural revolution began in Europe and heralded a more widespread application of pest control. With the work of Linnaeus and other scholars and the commercial needs to ensure crops and livestock were protected, pest control became more systemized and spread throughout the world. As global trade increased, new pesticides were discovered.

At this point pest control was carried out by farmers and some householders as an everyday activity. By the early nineteenth century however, this changed as studies and writings started to appear that treated pest control as a separate discipline. Increasing use of intensive and large scale farming brought matching increases in the intensity and scale of pest scares such as the disastrous potato famine in Ireland in 1840. Pest control management was scaled up to meet these demands, to the point that dedicated pest controllers began to emerge throughout the 20th century.

In 1921 the first crop-spraying aeroplane was employed and in 1962 flying insect control was revolutionized when Insect-o-cutor started selling fly killer machines using ultra violet lamps.

Pest control is still carried out by farmers and householders to this day. There are also pest control specialists (sometimes called pesties); many are one-person businesses and others work for large companies. In most countries the pest control industry has been dogged by a few bad practitioners who have tarnished the reputation for the highly professional and responsible majority.

One thing is for certain, from way before the Sumerians of 2500BC to us in modern times, there have always been - and probably always will be - pests (including some human ones!). Thank goodness, therefore, that we have pest controllers.

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