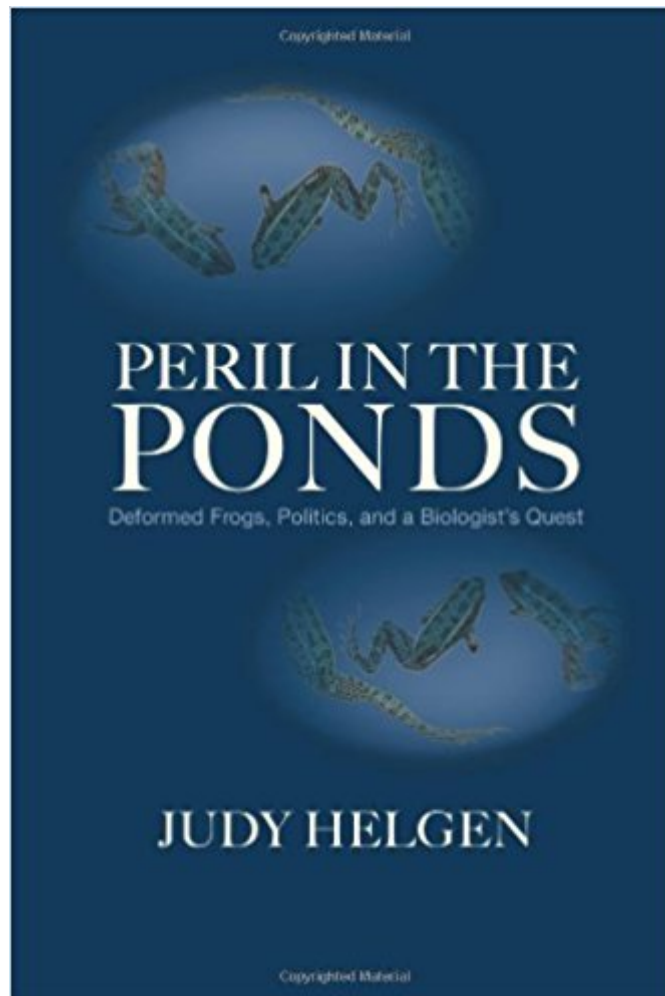




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# **Peril In The Ponds: Deformed Frogs, Politics, And A Biologist's Quest**



## Synopsis

Peril in the Ponds tells the story of a government biologist's investigation into the mystery of deformed frogs, an epidemic that grew during the 1990s and continues today. It provides an inside view of a highly charged environmental issue that aroused the attention of the public and the media and sparked controversies among scientists, politicians, and government agencies. By the 1990s, wetlands across the United States were endangered from pollution and decades of drainage to convert them into farmland and urban developments. But when deformed frogs—many with missing legs or eyes, footless stumps, or misshapen jaws—began to emerge from Minnesota wetlands, alarm bells went off. What caused such deformities? Pollution? Ultraviolet rays? Biological agents? And could the mysterious cause also pose a threat to humans? Judy Helgen writes with passionate concern about vulnerable frogs and wetlands as she navigates through a maze of inquisitive media and a reluctant government agency. She reports on the complexity of a growing catastrophe for frogs and broadens the issue as she researches and meets with scientists from around the world. She affirms the importance of examining aquatic life to understand pollution and the need to rescue our remaining wetlands. She also shares the fears expressed by the teachers, students, and other citizens who found these creatures, sensed a problem, and looked to her for answers. Ultimately, this is a story about the biological beauty of wetlands and our need to pay attention to the environment around us.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Do the observations of a curiously stubborn field biologist have any relevance to the busy lives of parents raising children? Or to agricultural economics, public health policymaking, and the corporate control of science? Here's your answer. *Peril in the Ponds* begins with frogs and travels the world. Its author is brave, its evidence convincing, its story compelling. Judy Helgen is Winston Churchill in a pair of waders. Read what she has to say . . . and then do something."

—Sandra Steingraber, author of *Living Downstream: An Ecologist's Personal Investigation of Cancer and the Environment*

"This is a book for anyone who cares about the environment, not just in Minnesota but every place where there are frogs and farms."

—Craig Pittman, author of *Paving Paradise: Florida's Vanishing Wetlands and the Failure of No Net Loss*

Judy Helgen was at ground zero when the epidemic of malformed frogs tipped from a regional environmental issue to an international phenomenon. Her book takes us through a heady time when industry and governments were scared and emotions ran as hot as they did during the Love Canal debacle or following the publication of *Silent Spring*.

—Michael Lannoo, author of *Malformed Frogs: The Collapse of Aquatic Ecosystems*

. . . the very few who have worked on the issue have not produced a definitive understanding of deformed frogs. Helgen deserves great credit for her accomplishments under the circumstances and for bringing the issue back under our scrutiny."

—BioScience

It is important for students to understand how politics can alter, shape, and unfortunately, even stop important research. However, even more importantly, *Peril in the Ponds* demonstrates the positive societal impacts of dedicated scientists who fight through such roadblocks. *Peril in the Ponds* is clearly written, accessible, and makes an important contribution to the environmental change and wetland conservation literature."

—Wetlands

*Peril* does a fine job of combining the thrill of a scientific whodunit (just exactly what is responsible for frog deformities in Minnesota?) with a 'this-is-my-story' monologue from a professional scientist. And it is the side story of Dr. Helgen's life, interwoven with the realities of modern science, rather than the frog deformities themselves that steal the show in this book. . . . *Peril in the Ponds* is a worthwhile read and can play an important role as a supplemental text for an environmental science class. It is an excellent segue into conversations regarding the scientific method and how it interdigitates with agency administration, the media, the public, and with policy decisions. It provides an avenue for discussion regarding experimental design, the true nature of science, and the role that scientific discovery plays in society. It also serves as an opening for conversations focusing on career choices and whether the benefits of a scientific career, such as that of Dr. Helgen, are worth the personal costs and professional frustrations."

—PLOS Biology

Judy Helgen spent many years as a state government research scientist in biological monitoring at the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, after earning a PhD in zoology from the University of Minnesota. Since retiring from the MPCA, she has taught at Metropolitan State University and was lead author of the Sierra Club report Restoring Water Quality Certification in Minnesota. For more information on Helgen's work, please see her website: <http://www.judyhelgen.com/>

"Perils in the Pond" is a beautiful combination of science and real life. Author, Judith Helgen, describes the search for answers to a scientific horror and the political roadblocks which constantly prevent basic research. One feels as though one is reading a mystery and rooting for the good guys, Judith and her frogs. Like a mystery, this book cannot be easily put aside.

An insightful window from an insider into the reality of our impact on our basic ecosystems along with the challenges we face to identify and deal with them.

I chose 4/5 stars for this book because it was a very emotion, interesting and well written and read. Judy Helgen's Peril in the Ponds is an autobiography of her life and the work she did on wetlands and the research on deformed frogs while working for the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA). This book is filled with emotion, which is understandable since it is an autobiography, but also packed with scientific data, research and collaborations with other agencies about her work that can be backed up by outside sources. The emotion in this book could be taken in a positive or negative way. In the positive way, it shows that she really cares about her work and genuinely cares about the issue and it helps also get the readers attention and to also care about the issue. However, on the opposite side, it could be taken as a negative attribute because people could say that the emotion clouds people judgment and goes along with what she thinks is the issue based on faith rather than facts. But I don't think that her emotion in the book is negative what so ever. The reason I feel this way is because she does back up all her accusations and assumptions with cold hard data. What I really think is amazing is that she was there at the beginning. I don't mean to say the beginning of when the problem first occurred, because when it was first brought to her attention by the school teacher in Henderson County, Minnesota, that's not when the problem first occurred. I mean say that she was the first one to start to ask questions, do research and raise awareness about what was going on in peoples back yards. She was a "ground zero" for this problem. In this book she talks about all the struggles that she had to go through with her work on getting funding to do all the things she wanted to in the frog research. First of all, this was not her primary focus at

the MPCA, she was originally there to work on coming up with a rating scale for the quality of wetlands, so when this frog issue was brought to her attention, it took a lot of courage and commitment to put her wetland research on hold and work on the frog issue, even though she had been working on the wetland rating scale for years. There were tons of funding battles that she had to deal with, she was criticized by scientists hired by chemical companies that tried and discredit and disprove her findings, she was almost fired from her job (more than once), and her intense work even put stress on her marriage. What was also interesting is that the MPCA is all about enforcement, and when she investigated all these findings, and asked for all the funding to help her investigation, her bosses were very reluctant to get the money to help her in her research, since this was not something that the MPCA usually does. With all this she still drove on with what she was doing because she knew that what she was doing was important, and that's another reason why I liked this book, was because of her dedication. I read this book for a class of mine and I also know some other students on my campus that also read the book. Some of my peers that read the book thought it was a little dragged out. I could see why they might think that. This book has a lot of ups and downs. It builds with her doing all her research and then field study's with taking samples then she would test her samples and you as the reader would sometimes think "Oh, this is it! She's gonna tell us what's causing all this!". However you continue reading a few more pages and you find out that her and her colleagues had hit a dead end. There are a few times where this happened and then at the end, SPOILER ALERT, you find out that she never actually figured out what exactly was causing the deformed frogs. They had scientists going out into the field with her to test UV radiation levels in the ponds, since radiation was a possible culprit. So yeah, I could see why people may have been disappointed in the book in that way, but I liked it, it just shows that big problems in life don't have simple solutions. The media was also a big part factor in the deformed frogs. Judy had to deal with the media constantly. When the news broke out that there were deformed frogs, there were people that became concerned and wondered if there were frogs being deformed by some unnatural thing, then how might or could it affect humans. She received loads of phone calls, letters and appearances from the news at her work wanted to hear what was happening in their back yards. The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) was put in place so that people could collaborate and solve public issues at hand, but it was actually somewhat detrimental to her work. Other scientists would many times take her raw data and come up with their own conclusions to what the problem was or wasn't, which was not always the most accurate in her opinion. I will say though, if you are thinking about reading this book and are on the fence about thinking of becoming an environmentalist, it may be discouraging because it really shows the struggles of an environmental kind of job. There were

times where she started to rethink her career path when things were not going the way she wanted them to, but she stayed with it and I commend her for it. I did actually get to meet Judy. She came to our school and gave a talk, and also came to my Environmental History class. It was really cool to see her and talk to her about her struggles with her job. I really enjoyed reading this book, especially since it was about an event that was and is happening where I am living. It was also very well written and I learned a lot about not only what happened, but also the importance of frogs, wetlands, and countless other things. I would recommend this book to anyone, trying to learn more about the issue, or just looking for a good read.

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