

In 1958, Chairman [Mao Zedong](#) of the Communist Party of China initiated the Four Pests campaign under China's Great Leap Forward. Chairman Mao decided that mosquitoes, flies, rats, and sparrows need to be exterminated. Three of these pests were targeted because of their role in spreading malaria, typhoid, and the [plague](#). As for the sparrows, Mao tossed them in because they are known to consume rice and other seeds from agricultural fields.

Campaign execution



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The Chinese government called all Chinese citizens to act together against these four pests. They disseminated posters illustrating the need for fly swatters, drums, gongs, and guns as tools in the fight to improve the health of the public. The people answered the call as they took all measures to kill the targeted “pests.”

To further encourage the citizens to actively participate in the campaign, the communist government honored schools, work groups, and government agencies with the highest number of pests killed.



PreventionWeb

From among the creatures, the sparrow received the most attention. The Chinese would make noise with pots, pans, and drums which scared and exhausted the sparrow to death. The people also ruined their nests, broke their eggs, and killed their fledglings.



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It was estimated that the Four Pests campaign killed 1.5 billion rats, 1 billion sparrows, more than 220 million pounds of flies, and more than 24 million pounds of mosquitoes. Given the numbers, the objective of the campaign was essentially reached.

Inadvertent consequences



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The Four Pests campaign almost caused the extinction of sparrows in China. But the birds also ate insects in addition to grains and as a result, agricultural crops were destroyed because of insect infestation. The locusts alone ate hundred of thousands of pounds of grain causing the starvation and death of about 43 million people.



Rolling Alpha

In 1959, researchers from China's Academy of Sciences conducted autopsies on dead sparrows and found that their stomachs contained more insects than grains. On the advice of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Chairman Mao declared the cessation of the killing of sparrows.