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Scientists identify new pollutant

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The hard pesticides, such as DDT and its chemical relatives, have been firmly pinpointed as certainly dangerous to animal, fish and bird life, and eventually to man.

Now, laboratories in the Western world have identified additional chemical relatives, not used as insecticides but as "plasticizers," which appear equally mordant.

According to Lee Lyman, biologist at the Massachusetts Fisheries and Wildlife Field Station, Westboro, these are PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) used in industry as lubricants, heat transfer agents and insulators.

PCBs are found in paints, synthetic resins, varnishes and waxes. They improve such properties of these products as chemical resistance, water resistance, adhesiveness and flexibility.

Unfortunately, says Lyman, they wash out eventually, and percolate through the soil, show up in fish and birds, have much the same effects (though less toxic) as the hard pesticides.

"But their half-life appears to be 50 to 100 years," says Lyman, which means they are going to be around a long time.

Another problem with the PCBs is that in the laboratory they interfere with the detection of the presence of the hard pesticides.

Lyman and other researchers have developed sophisticated methods of separating the two. But the laboratory and control work will have to come on fast.

A report in 'Nature" in December 1968 said: "In both Great Britain and North America it was the decline of the peregrine falcon which initiated concern about the extent of the harmful effects of environmental contamination.

"In the United States," the report warned, "The eastern population (of the falcon) was extinct before competent observers were aware of a general, widespread decline."

Lyman is dramatic about the situation. He agrees we might have reached a point of no return.

"If we cut it off now," he said, making a sharp karate chop with his hand, "we might be in time."

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