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JUL 31 1975

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Attack on PCBs sought

By Don Boxmeyer
Staff Writer

A group of Isle Royale habitues, including former Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (PCA) Director Grant Merritt, has implored the National Park Service to take "immediate action" against a perplexing industrial pollutant that is increasingly present in Lake Superior trout.

While not spelled out, that action could range from an attempt to stop the pollution to a ban on resurgent sport and commercial fishing in the Isle Royale area of Superior.

THE ISLE ROYALE Natural History Association, of which Merritt is a board member, recently met with John Morehead, superintendent of the remote Isle Royal National Park, to seek a solution caused by the presence of PCBs a toxic industrial compound—in the tissue of trout being caught in increasing numbers over the reefs and banks off Isle Royale.

PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyly) are known to cause birth defects in fish, birds and mammals. Some scientists believe PCBs can cause cancer in humans.

PCBs do not occur in nature, but are produced exclusively by Monsanto Chemical Co. for use in such products as plastics, printers ink, hydraulic fluid and electrical insulators.

The presence of PCBs in midwestern waters — especially Lake Michigan — has been known for some time. The presence of PCBs in Lake Superior Siscowet trout, for instance, was described by a college student in 1971.

But the problem took on some urgency recently when the U.S. Food and Drug Administration announced it would impound interstate shipments of commercial fish found to contain PCBs in excess of the U.S. Department of Agriculture "tolerance level" of 5 parts per million (ppm).

THAT NEW POLICY has resulted in a virtual shutdown on commercial carp fishing on Lake Pepin in the Mississippi River and growing concern for Great Lakes fishing.

Earlier this month, the Lake Superior Basin Study Center found PCBs in most of the nearly three dozen varieties of fish that comprise the lake's food chain. Many of the fish are not eaten by humans, but the Siscowet trout, an oily deepwater fish, was found to contain PCBs in excess of the tolerance levels.

Earlier in the year, Wayne Wilford, a biologist with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service at Ann Arbor, Mich., reported that a survey of Lake Superior trout has shown "disconcerting pattern of elevated residues near Isle Royale".

A major source of not only PCBs but mercury and DDT already found in the fish is the Thunder Bay, Ontario, industrial section along the North Shore of Lake Superior, the Wildlife Service believes.

It is not known what action the National Park Service might take in reponse to the Isle Royale group's plea. But that association, according to Merritt, already has begun a fund drive to finance its own detailed survey of lake trout.

Under rigidly controlled conditions, trout of various sizes will be caught, filleted and skinned. The skins then will be sectioned, sealed in plastic bags, frozen and shipped to a laboratory for analysis.

The PCBs problem comes at a time when the lake trout, which had once almost disappeared from Superior, are beginning to make a dramatic comeback. But Merritt said his organization would favor a ban on fishing if the pollution cannot be stopped at its industrial source.

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