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The menace that lurks in the lake

Last in a series

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Lake Michigan can provide exciting recreation, but it also offers dangerous contamination and visions of trash, depending upon where you stand and what you eat.

The scenery near Waukegan harbor features lovley stretches of sand along Illinois Beach State Park. It also includes lakeside garbage dumps and water which contains highly toxic chemicals.

The worst of the chemicals, PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) have seeped into Waukegan Harbor and the North Ditch (which drains into Lake Michigan near North Beach) from Outboard Marine Corporation. Several lawsuits ostensibly aimed at resolving the PCB threat are underway involving OMC, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Illinois attorney general. Although an environmental scientist has proposed that the harbor be used as a nationwide test for PCB-removal, the U.S. EPA is opposing all harbor projects until the lawsuits are resolved, which could take up to five years.

The danger in the harbor is not apparent to the uninformed eye. While the water surface at the northwest corner of the harbor is bustling with glamorous sailboats and yachts, the harbor bottom contains 25 times more PCBs than a sludge lagoon at a sewage treatment plant. The U.S. EPA says the PCBs have seeped down eight feet into the muck.

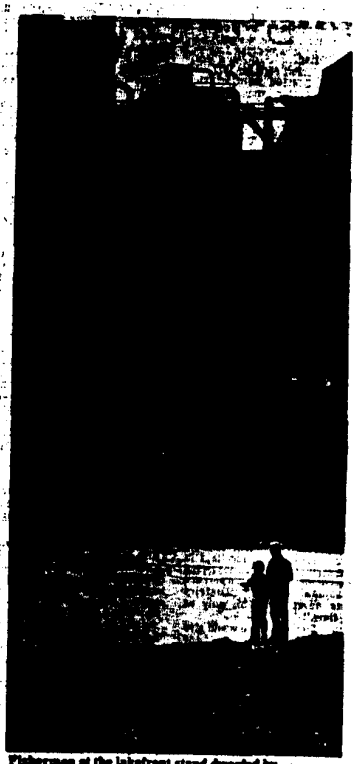
Nearby, a test station for OMC keeps the harbor waters continually bubbling. Some environmentalists fear that the PCBs, which normally settle down in water, may be kept in suspension and carried out into the lake by harbor traffic.

On the northeast bank of the harbor lies an apparently innocuous sand hill. But that hill, the remains of the last harbor dredging in 1974, contains 80,000 cubic yards of material dug out of the bottom. It also likely contains a high quantity of PCBs, since OMC released an estimated two million pounds of PCBs from the early 1930's until 1972.

Further out in the harbor is an intake for Waukegan's drinking water system. Tests thus far have shown water at the intake, which is not used on a regular basis, does not contain high levels of PCBs. The city's main water intake is even further off shore.

Out in the lake, heading north from the harbor, towering over the shoreline is the coal-fired generating station of Commonwealth Edison. The station has been the target of several EPA lawsuits over the years, the most recent one filed last summer, citing the plant as "a major pollutor" whose smokestacks exceed emission requirements.

A full day spent on Waukegan's lakefront can emphasize both the beauty of and the threat posed to the lake: a sunrise arching beautifully over the open water to the east, and a sunset sinking strikingly into an aging shoreline industrial area.



Fishermen at the lakefront stand dwarfed by Commonwealth Edison's coalfired Waukegan plant.

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