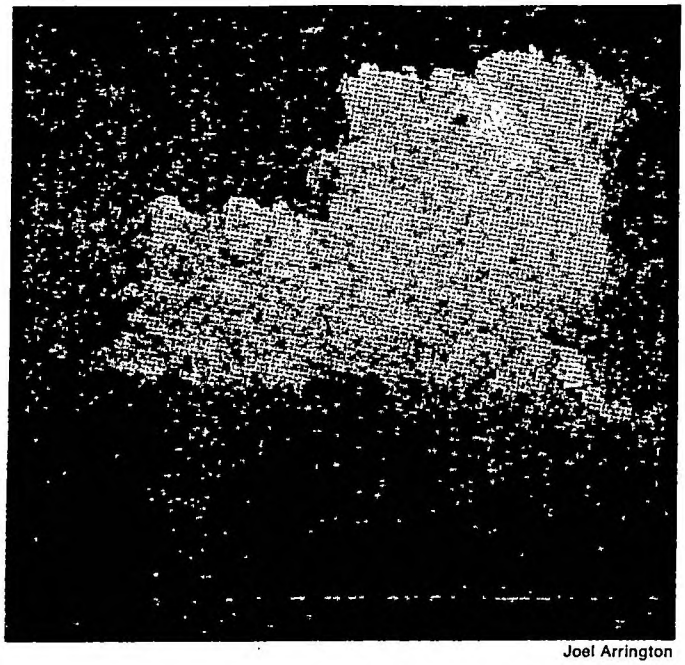
Our Natural Heritage

By Jim Dean

The Invisible Assassins

There was a time when a thunderhead on the horizon signaled nothing more ominous than an approaching storm. At the very worst, there might be some wind or hail and local damage to crops or property. The rain itself was often a blessing. There is increasing evidence, however, that some rains may be, quite literally, poisonous.



Joel Arrington

Mark Taylor's article, "The Rain That Kills," which appears in this issue addresses a problem that is a growing threat throughout the East including North Carolina. It seems that rain may no longer always nourish crops and forests, but harm them. It may no longer replenish soil and revitalize lakes and streams, but make them sterile. Rain water, long a symbol of purity, in fact often carries so much sulfur, nitrogen and other air pollutants that it can be deadly.

One of the most frightening aspects of this growing problem is that this form of pollution originates hundreds, sometimes thousands, of miles away in the industrial Midwest. To be specific, most of the acid rain that falls in North Carolina comes from industries in the Ohio Valley. It is hardly a welcome gift, but it points out again how truly small our world has become, and demonstrates that health threats seem ubiquitious.

There are so many of us crowded on this planet that virtually everything anyone does has an effect on someone else. Furthermore, the danger is often completely undetectible. You can't see the sulfur in rain water. You can't taste the radiation from a nuclear accident. You can't look at an oyster and tell if it is contaminated by organic pollution or tell that dairy products or meat are laced with some harmful substance. You may not be able to smell the poisons that leach into the ground and air from illegal chemical dumps. You are unlikely to know, until it's too late, whether there are asbestos fibers in your lungs which are causing cancer. The list of known threats could go on and on, and we have no idea how many other invisible threats exist.

Many people don't know, forget, or don't care that their actions can often have adverse effects on others. It might involve so simple an act as flushing the contents of an old can of DDT down the toilet in order to dispose of it. It never occurs to some people that this is a very efficient and dangerous way of releasing a deadly chemical back into environment. Where do they think that chemical goes? Will it wind up in someone else's drinking water? Certainly. Will they know it? Not likely.

An even worse example is the situation North Carolinians were confronted with last year when dangerous PCBs were dumped alongside 210 miles of our highways by a New York disposal company. Such a crime has great potential for harm to hundreds, perhaps thousands of people. A madman with a rifle might create more sensation by killing a dozen people, but he could never do as much harm as those who knowingly or unknowingly pump our world full of poisons.

Game biologists for the N. C. Wildlife Resources Commission found significantly high levels of PCBs in tissue samples of doves and rabbits which were collected in areas where PCB-laced oil was dumped along roads. PCB levels in some dove tissues averaged 90 parts per million which is about 18 times the maximum level of five parts per million allowed by the federal government in poultry and fish sold for human consumption. Rabbits averaged 95 parts per million, an even higher concentration.

Bob Hazel, executive director of the Wildlife Commission, bluntly states that this sort of finding represents only the tip of the iceberg. "There is so much that we don't know about how these chemicals affect wildlife or those who consume wildlife," he said. "This goes not only for PCBs and herbicides, but also for pesticides, heavy metals and other toxic substances."

Various types of poisons are also accumulating in your body and mine. It is not a very encouraging thought, yet many people seem unconcerned. "I can't worry about everything that might cause me harm," they say. "We've all got to die of something."

That kind of sentiment is not only foolish, it is also one of the main reasons we've let our environment deteriorate to its present sad shape.

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