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Short Title P.C.Bs and D.D.T.

EXTRACT:

Scientist: But the trouble is that not only the organo-chlorine insecticides which we deliberately use for a purpose in the country, we have also other chemicals which are equally persistent which accidentally get into the environment. For instance, the substance P.C.Bs as we call them, are used in the plastic industry: they've appeared, we just don't know how they got there and we've really got to find out this and control this as well.

Peter Stone: They may have got intothe environment from quite unexpected sources, such as plastics in domestic garbage. When these are burnt, even in municipal incinerators, P.C.Bs can get into the atmosphere. Plastics only make up 1% of our rubbish today, but in ten years this is expected to rise to over 6% and unless we deal with it, the smoke of every incinerator may be churning it out. The bodies of seabirds found dead in their thousands in the Irish Sea in 1969 contained unexpectedly high residues of P.C.B. But for some time the analysts at Monkswood didn't realise it was P.C.B. they were finding. Because of the precautions surrounding its direct manufacture and industrial use, they weren't looking for it amongst the organo-chlorines and couldn't at first recognise its characteristic signature.

Woman Analyst: In order to find a pollutant, you've got to know what you expect to find. The only reason we found P.C.B. is that it was rather similar to D.D.T. Supposing it hadn't been, would we ever have found it? Might we, in fact, be polluting

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the whole planet with some unknown chemical that we haven't yet found or even thought of. Even with D.D.T. we only may have avoided a biological catastrophe: what about the D.D.T. that's already been distributed around the place? We don't know where it's got to or what it's doing. We may, in fact, not have heard the last of D.D.T. by a long way.

P. Stone: In the last three or four years the hard coral reefs of the Pacific have been attacked by a plague of giant starfish, the Crown of Thorns: it digests the coral polyps and leaves behind nothing but their dead and brittle skeletons. One theory which has been seriously entertained is that some natural predator of the starfish larvae has been wiped out by D.D.T. - maybe, maybe not. It can't be ruled out because our ignorance about the effect of modern chemicals on the world's natural food chain is so great. Dr. Mellanby's comment on the situation is, to say the least, disturbing.

Dr. Mellanby: I think that the organo-chlorine insecticides we've spoken about there, I think there that we've probably acted sufficiently quickly. They're not .. they don't exist for ever and I think the process of phasing out of these is going ahead sufficiently quickly probably to save us from any really serious long-term effect. P.C.Bs, well, we just don't know about these, I think that industry has been alerted here and I know that disposal at sea and things like this is likely to be stopped. But unknown substances, it's very difficult, the only way we can discover about these is when they've done some damage.

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