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UK coastal waters in 'precarious' state

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The state of Britain's coastal waters is described as precarious in the first official report carrying detailed evidence of the extent of contamination from man-made chemicals and the poisonous heavy metals contained in industrial waste.

The report, produced by the Natural Environment Research Council, is the final assessment of the events surrounding the deaths of thousands of seabirds in the Irish Sea 18 months ago. Estimates of the final figure vary up to 100,000.

The original implication of the widely used group of synthetic chemicals known as polychlorinated-biphenyls, or PCBs, in the disaster is confirmed. But the conclusion, produced by the joint investigations of about twenty laboratories show that some of the metals that can poison man if absorbed in small amounts, such as antimony, cadmium, mercury and lead, were present in some of the bird tissues.

In a small number of the birds that were eventually analysed, some heavy metals were detected in quantities at which symptoms of poisoning would be expected. But in general the disaster was believed due to the effect of low levels of a combination of chemicals at a time when the birds were most vulnerable.

At that period of the year they were in moult, using some of their stored body fat to supplement feeding at a time when their movement was restricted. In such circumstances harmful accumulations of chemicals could occur in the tissues in a way that would be less likely with a bird in prime condition earlier in the year.

But the report says that even though individual pollutants in the seas were not sufficiently concentrated to harm wildlife by themselves, in combination they might tip the scale between life and death. The effect of this precarious situation could be to affect the balance of whole populations. There is as yet no absolute proof that this happened; but the possibility can not be ignored.