London Evening Standard
September 15, 1971

Sea pollution riddle as puffins vanish

By ALAN MASSAM

THE BRITISH Trust for Ornithology reveals today that seabirds are mysteriously dying off Britain's coasts.

A survey of the puffin—probably the most attractive of all seabirds—has shown that the numbers on St. Kilda have dropped dramatically from three million pairs to about 250 000 pairs in the last seven or eight years.

St. Kilda is a remote island group off the Outer Hebrides and was always thought to be a safe refuge for the puffin.

The BTO report will add further impetus to the mounting worldwide concern about marine pollution sparked off by the massive sea bird wreck (mortality) in the Irish Sea in the autumn of 1969. Estimates of deaths on that occasion varied from 12,000 to 100,000.

The exact cause of the 1969 deaths has not been identified, but some of the bird corpses contain unusually high concentrations of polychlorinated biphenyls, the by-product of several industrial processes.

The main manufacturer of polychlorinated biphenyls restricted their distribution earlier this year to processes which could not cause environmental damage.

Today's report on the puffins remarks that the losses were too high to be accounted for by oil slicks.

"With recent concern over the level of toxic marine pollutants, the lack of an explanation for this disastrous decline in all the more alarming," it adds.

One of the most disturbing features of the unexplained sea bird deaths is the fact that biologists regard them as a sensitive indicator of the true state of the environment.

Dr. John Cray, a marine biologist at Leeds University, revealed recently that fish-eating birds around Britain's coasts contained from eight to 28 parts per million of DDT and dieldrin in their bodies. "We do not know what effect those chemicals have on man," he said.

MONS 032294