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Pollution killing many fish in Missouri streams

One of the saddest conservation stories of the Missouri year — or perhaps it should be called an anticonservation story — came to us recently in a bulletin from the Missouri Department of Conservation. The story tells of the killing of more than 206,000 fish from pollution in our Missouri streams up to mid-August.

What causes such disasters to our wildlife? The answer in this case is fairly simple. These fish kills were nearly all caused by raw sewage, poisonous chemicals or mine sludge flushed into streams by heavy rains or by accident. Most instances are, however, avoidable. One of the worst violators of clean stream regulations in the past has been the city of Springfield in southwest Missouri — although Springfield is constructing a completely modern sewage system which should solve its pollution problems. Late in August a very heavy rain in Springfield was followed by a big fish kill in the James River below the mouth of Wilson Creek which drains the Springfield area. This stream during dry spells builds up huge amounts of organic matter from sewage which is flushed downstream into the James after every heavy rain.

Other Missouri towns have had similar unfortunate but generally avoidable incidents.

The month of August brought several heavy rains, and major fish kills occurred at the rate of one a week. More than 106,000 fish died when a Tarkio fertilizer company flushed an ammonia tank and the ammonia reached Tarkio River.

But of all instances of pollution that killed fish, the one which could have been most disastrous took place in St. Louis. The Conservation Department had purchased a carload of carp in Wisconsin, and these were used to stock seven city park lakes as part of the Urban Fishing Program. Only herculean effort by department employes prevented what might have been serious disaster.

After the carp had been placed in the lakes on July 1st, they were found to contain a high accumulation of PCBs, a group of chemicals of the highly toxic and long-lasting chlorinated hydrocarbon family which includes DDT. Fortunately, department employes were able to remove all the fish and bury them safely, while the lakes were closed to fishing. This is the first instance in Missouri of fish carrying high concentrations of this poison — but other cases have shown up in several parts of the country.

An Upper Mississippi Task Force representing environmental agencies of Wisconsin and Minnesota reports that 2 per cent of carp tested showed PCB residues higher than Food and Drug Administration's maximum allowance of 5 parts per million. And a Sports Illustrated article states white bass and catfish might be added to the list — although smallmouth, crappie and walleye with a low fat content showed less than two parts PCB per million. The article reports, however, that Lake Michigan trout and salon and large lake trout from Lake Superior are all contaminated. The Environmental Protection Agency says that PCBs can cause birth defects, and other health problems. The poisons, sad to say, are manufactured by only one United States firm which is located in St. Louis.

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