

Hunters and Bear

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WILDLIFE

Unsafe if Eaten As Steady Diet?

By MELISSA HALE

Two bears — a mother and her cub — hung outside the Handlebar in Newman this week.

The bears were shot by Jim and Sonny Jewtraw near South Meadows.

As the Tuesday afternoon sun began to fade, the hunting party gathered proudly around the bears for pictures. The photographer asked what would happen to the bears.

Sonny Jewtraw answered:

"They won't go to waste. That's for sure. We'll eat 'em. Bear meat is good. It's good if it's cooked right, anyway."

That's an attitude many Adirondackers have long held towards the successful hunting or fishing they've done. Killed animals can be eaten. There's never been any doubt about it. And maybe there never need be.

But still Adirondackers should know about the testing that is going on to make sure the meat or fish caught or killed throughout the state is safe to eat.

Why are the studies — involving fish, birds, deer and bear — underway?

The concern centers around PCBs. That's short for polychlorinated biphenyls — a manufactured chemical formerly often used in industry.

Questions were raised several years ago about their dangerous effects when eaten by humans.

And PCBs in the environment are often evident in both wild and commercially-sold meat and fish. They have been found to be toxic when eaten regularly in certain concentrations.

The Federal Drug Administration has set down regulations for PCB levels in meats marketed commercially. But, until recently, nothing has been done to ascertain PCB levels in fish or game that is killed and eaten by the harvester.

THREE NEW York State agencies are working together now to ascertain what PCB levels in various animals in different areas are unsafe if eaten regularly.

The process began about a month ago when samples of various fish and game from different areas throughout the state were sent to a central laboratory for analysis.

Gary B. Will, Conservation Biologist at the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) in Ray Brook, whose role in the PCB story has largely to do with collection, a function with which he was already familiar, explained:

"This animal collection is part of a statewide investigation, in all nine regions. . .Our region (for the DEC) is based in Ray Brook and covers Clinton, Essex and Franklin counties. We were all asked to send in pieces of materials."

He explained the area animals sent in for the study were frozen, labelled and shipped to Rome, where laboratory analysis is being done. He said that the animals sent in for the PCB investigation from this area were two bear, one found on the road, one taken by a hunter, some woodcocks and ducks provided by hunters and one or two raccoon.

Making use of already dead animals is something Mr. Will cares about. He calls it:

"Good use of a natural resource."

The uses vary, but they are usually concerned with finding herd and population information for properly regulating hunting seasons.

FOR EXAMPLE, Mr. Will explained that 25,000 deer a year are killed by car alone in New York state. When a deer is hit by a car he said "the person that hit it is entitled to take it for his or her own consumption," which he also termed "a good use of a natural resource."

But if the dead deer is not claimed and is reported to the DEC it can be used to determine a number of things. For instance, Mr. Will said the severity of the winter can be determined if it is a doe by counting the number of developing embryos. If the doe is an adult with no embryos he said this means "she has probably reabsorbed them because her nutritional level is so low."

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Wildlife Unsafe if Eaten as Steady Diet?

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The effect of the winter can also be determined by cutting the fur and meat of the big bone, Mr. Will said.

"You crack it and look at the marrow," he explained.

"White in the marrow is a sign of a healthy animal. A deer in the wild will start to use up fat storage to keep itself in a healthy condition. . . The last fat storage place is in the bone marrow. The color turns from white to pink to red gelatinous — like raspberry jello. That means all the protein has been drained out."

"This gives us an idea of the health condition of a herd," he concluded.

Similar tests can be done on other animals. For instance the small bear hit on Route 75 had a tooth pulled before he was sent off for PCB testing, according to Mr. Will.

"IT WAS a procedure and it will be cross-sectioned," said Mr. Will. Teeth, like trees, he explained, have annual rings called cementum annuli that can be counted to tell the age of an animal. He said:

"It's important when looking at a population to determine age and sex ratios and characteristics and this is one way of doing it. . . It's needed for determining hunting seasons."

He went on to explain:

"We are looking for certain diseases in these animals too, like parasites in deer."

A difference between the annual rings done to determine reproduction and herd-health characteristics and the PCB testing is that PCB testing determines potential effects on human health rather than dealing with animal health.

As John Spagnoli, DEC Chief of Fish & Wildlife Ecology in Albany explained:

"What we are trying to do is determine, whether flesh derived during the open season is good."

He added:

"PCB involvement has caused general concern lately. The Federal Food & Drug Administration (FDA) has set a standard that any meat above a certain level (anything over five parts per million) will be confiscated to protect the consumer."

He further explained that this only applied to the commercial-market kind that animals or fish "harvested and sold or eaten by the harvester" are never tested for PCB's.

TO FILL this void, three New York state agencies are working together: DEC, the Department of Health, and the Agriculture & Markets Department.

Mr. Spagnoli explained:

"With the data received, these agencies will make recommendations as to whether certain flesh killed in certain areas should be eaten or not."

When asked what the effects on a human would be if she or he ate meat with an excess of PCBs Mr. Spagnoli answered:

"I'm a fish and game person. You'd have to check with someone in the Health Department on that one."

Health Department Deputy Commissioner, Dr. Roger Herdman, never answered that question directly, except to say:

"You could sit down and eat one fish you caught at 10 parts per million (five parts over the FDA commercial regulations) and nothing would happen. It's just the people that eat them everyday that might have the problem."

Dr. Herdman also gave a bit of history on the PCB problem. The PCB problem, he said, first came to international attention in the late 1960's as a result of a case in Japan. "A PCB solution leaked into the rice oil prepared in a factory in Japan," he said. "Many became ill. First there was a bad skin rash, like acne, then lethargy, a nervous problem, and a liver disease. There were deaths and still births."

HE SAID it was an extreme situation. It was later calculated, Dr. Herdman explained, that "you could eat a certain amount before getting these symptoms." He went on to say:

"The FDA figure is hundredfold less than that for safety. It is just a ball park figure."

The real answers came from Dr. Charles Lawrence, a research scientist with the Department of Health.

To begin with, he explained what PCBs are: "Two benzine rings with a bunch of chlorines."

He also explained that prior to 1971, PCBs were used in many industrial processes — useful because of their great flame resistance. He mentioned that, among other things, they were used in making capacitators, for carbonless photocopy paper, as hydraulic fluid as a heat transfer liquid, and in pesticides.

He explained that in 1971 the federal government put together an inter-agency task force that determined PCBs "adverse environmental effect." He described it as "not unlike DDT" in the way PCBs had "gotten all over the environment" and in their varied adverse effects, such as causing "birds to lay soft eggs."

He also mentioned the 1968 incident in Japan where PCBs had "leaked into one batch of Yusuho cooking oil. . . causing about 150 people to show symptoms of an unusual disease."

HE REPORTED that because of their findings the federal task force recommended that PCB be used only in instances where there were no alternatives. There was only one such instance. This was in the manufacturing of electric components — transmitters and capacitors, Dr. Lawrence explained. He said that there would have been a greater risk in switching back to using mineral oils, which are highly flammable, in their production.

In 1971, he said, Monsanto, the sole U.S. manufacturer of PCB agreed to sell "to outfits that only used it for that purpose."

"It was a voluntary agreement and Monsanto has adhered to it well," Dr. Lawrence added.

He went on:

"Before 1970, no one had any significant ideas PCBs would be adverse substance. . . For example, the General Electric plant at Fort Edward on the Hudson dumped 50 to 100 pounds of PCBs per day accidently into the Hudson."

The General Electric Company has had a capacitor manufacturing plant in Fort Edward and Hudson Falls since 1940. Dr. Lawrence continued:

PCB spilled on the floor, went into the drains, and into the river.

"They now have it so under three pounds a day. The Department of Environmental Conservation wants them to eliminate it (PCB drainage) completely.

"General Electric says that is impossible. (DEC Commissioner Ogden) Reid is trying to force them legally to stop it."

THE FOOD, rather than the environmental concerns, were dealt with nationally when the Federal Drug Administration set some standards regarding PCBs for interstate commerce. Dr. Lawrence conferred with Dr. Herdman's view, saying:

"Their action guideline is five parts per million."

He went a step further, however, to explain why PCBs posed a threat.

"First of all," he said, "PCB's, like DDT, have a very long half-life.

This means they are stable chemically; they don't break down. They're around a very, very long time."

"Secondly, they get concentrated up in the food chain. . . For instance, its concentration in water is negligible. But each animal that consumes another accumulates more PCBs. Eagles, hawks and man (being at the top of the food chain, the final consumers) get the worst of it."

He went on to say:

"The most relevant aspect of wild animals is check are the fish. The DEC and the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) have been testing samples of fish from all over the state. It has been determined that striped bass in the Hudson and Salmon in Lake Ontario have PCB levels that exceed FDA regulations."

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DR. LAWRENCE explained that below Fort Edward and Hudson Falls (where the General Electric plant is located) there is a high PCB content in the water; above this there are just traces. He went on to say that there is little commercial fishing there so the FDA regulations do not apply, but there is much recreational fishing so "the Department of Health and the Department of Environmental Conservation have to make recommendations."

In August, the health commissioner recommended that fishermen do not eat fish caught in that part of the Hudson any more than once a week. DEC Commissioner Reid later recommended they do not consume any fish caught from the Hudson, Dr. Lawrence reported.

Dr. Lawrence also cautiously brought up another aspect of potentional danger in consuming PCB's: Cancer.

Dr. Lawrence emphasized:

"Literally thousands of things are found to be carcinogenic, of which there is no evidence in humans."

He explained that Dr. Kimbrough of the Federal Drug Administration has recently completed a report that states PCB's produce cancer in the liver of rats. He said:

"The Health Department, of course, has to explore that avenue. We are now doing a study looking at workers exposed to PCBs to see the effects.

"It is a concern to us. We are obligated to find out.

"But this should be no cause for alarm."

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By the way, the Lake Placid hunting party in the page-one picture: Standing left to right, Sonny Jewtraw, Delbert Lawrence, and Jim Jewtraw; kneeling left to right, Tom Shipman and Al Lawrence Sr. Other members of the hunting party, not pictured: Jim Frusco, Bruce Watson and Al Lawrence, Jr.