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'Poison' probe as wild life dies in Irish Sea

RIDDLE OF 'THE DITCH OF DEATH'

By MARK DOWDNEY and GORDON GREGOR

INVESTIGATIONS are going on to see if chemical waste could be turning the Irish Sea into a "Ditch of Death."

Scientists and nature experts are trying to find out the full effects of the waste, because it may be the mystery killer of thousands of seabirds this autumn.

The chemicals involved are PCBs — polychlorinated biphenyls. They are toxic waste from the plastics industry.

Already, they are rated as potentially dangerous to birds and marine life.

And big concentrations of them were found in sample carcases examined after the death of 10,000 common seabirds named guillemots in the Irish Sea—which has now been referred to as a "Ditch of Death."

Checks for any traces of the chemicals are also to be made on seals found dead or dying recently on the North Cornwall coast.

Samples

Two other coast riddles are also puzzling experts.

Along the South Coast, more than the usual amounts of ulcerated and scarred cod are being caught. Some of the [illegible] fish will be examined by Government experts.

And samples of white powder found along the coastline in West Caernarvonshire have been sent

Check-up on chemicals called PCBs

to the nature conservancy at Bangor for analysis.

The first warning about the PCBs menace came from Sweden. A scientist found evidence of the chemicals in predatory birds.

In Britain, the alert was taken seriously.

Investigations here started at the Government-run nature conservancy experimental station in Huntingdonshire.

Early results from an intensive study of freshwater birds indicated a percentage of PCBs.

But it was not until the guillemot disaster that the full potential danger was realised.

The dead birds were fully grown. They were found in their thousands on beaches in East Ireland, North-West England.

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'DITCH OF DEATH' MYSTERY

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marked and their deaths were—and still are—a complete mystery to us," one of the officers said.

The Huntingdonshire investigators examined many birds—and found a high concentration of PCBs.

Ian Prest, a member of the team involved in the research, said: "These birds had obviously been in a moulting stage and, therefore, spent a great deal of time on the water.

"This meant they would absorb greater quantities of any PCBs present than normal.

"These birds had been living on their fat reserves and eventually would have no strength at all and died."

Now scientists are catching healthy adult guillemots to discover what the average level of PCBs is in their bodies.

Several Ministries have been told of the results of the scientists' work so far. Some action is being taken.

The Ministry of Agriculture disclosed yesterday that at the time of the guillemot disaster a comprehensive check was made on leading plastics manufacturers and all known dumpers of industrial waste.

Examinations were made of records showing when, where and how PCB waste had been disposed of in the previous four months.

A spokesman said: "We have not found any evidence of unauthorised dumping of PCBs in the area, but we cannot rule it out."

He explained that there is no control of dumping outside a limit three miles off the coast.

"For some years," he went on, "we have had a voluntary arrangement with the main dumping firms and manufacturers, whereby they ask us for our advice.

Eggs

"We tell them the safe places. They are usually in very deep water off the edge of the Continental Shelf."

The Ministry, however, cannot say categorically that all firms are co-operating with them fully.

PCBs have been found in the tissues and eggs of a number of birds in the Baltic area and in Holland—and also in fish.

Fishery inspectors in Britain regularly "monitor" fish and shellfish caught around the coast. They are examined for pesticide levels and any toxic matter.

Special checks were made in the Irish Sea area recently, but harmful levels of PCBs were not found in any of the fish examined.

French fishermen have made strong protests to their Government about the number of dead and poisonous fish in their catches.

Mr. Bruce Campbell, joint secretary of the Council of Nature—a consortium of voluntary organisations whose main function is to conserve nature—feels more could be done in Britain.

"The whole situation is very worrying," he said. "I feel that much more investigation should be done.

"There seems to be a distinct possibility that there has been some general pollution of the sea in the Irish Sea area."

Trawler-boat skipper Samuel McKnight, of Kilkeel, Co. Down, said that while fishing is unaffected, local bird populations—particularly puffins—seem to be suffering badly.

He said: "There are often a lot of dead birds around after a spell of bad weather, but conditions at present do not account for the large number of deaths."

Scientists and naturalists are still arguing about what caused the deaths of almost fifty seals in Cornwall.

Theories

Mr. Nigel Bonner, head of the Seal Research Unit of the Natural Environment Research Council said that all seals around Britain had a certain percentage of PCBs.

Tissue analysis of the dead seals still had to be made to determine the percentage in the Cornwall victims, he said.

Arthur Bourne, chairman of the Ocean Resources Conservation Association, visited Cornwall at the weekend. He has several theories.

One of them is that adult seals are passing on toxics picked up through pollution to their young by way of the mother's milk.

This causes a build-up in the young seal's blubber, and only begins to affect the animal when it is weaned and starts living on its fat.

The outcome: A weakening effect, an inability to hunt fish and eventual starvation.

A study is being made of the current flow of the Irish Sea.

It is felt that there could be a danger of a build-up of industrial waste materials in the area through the circular movement of currents.

Suggestions that dumped war gas may be the cause of the deaths of seabirds and seals were rejected last night by the Defence Ministry.

The last known dumping of gas was in 1963, when canisters of British and German gas were sealed in containers and loaded on board a ship eventually scuttled in deep Atlantic water.

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The cause of their deaths is still unknown.

"Nobody knows what is killing them," RSPCA chief inspector John Matthews said yesterday.

Nearly 400 birds in trouble have been washed up on an eight-mile stretch of coast between Fleetwood and Lytham, Lancs, in the past three months.

"They are gasping for breath and look as if they have no blood," Mr Matthews said.

In Anglesey, RSPCA officials have found more than 200 dead seabirds. Many more have been seen in inaccessible spots.

"All were completely un-

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