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The Fighting Chair

by John Hearst, jr.

"We have met the enemy, and he is us!" said the comic strip character Pogo a few years back. Pogo, as usual, was good for a laugh. The words are still applicable but no longer quite as funny.

The latest news from the Environmental Protection Agency is that many electrical plants around the country have been dumping non-biodegradable chemical wastes known as PCBs (polychlorinated bephonyls) into a number of streams and tributaries around the country, possibly up to ten million pounds per year.

These chemicals are as harmful as DDT and mercury wastes. Laboratory tests have shown PCBs to be highly toxic: Low level exposure results in skin, intestinal and respiratory disorders. Laboratory animals injected with higher dosages have developed cancer.

As a result of this dumping of PCBs, many fish have been contaminated. Until now the Food and Drug Administration has allowed interstate shipments of fish with up to five parts per million PCBs in their system. This maximum may soon be cut in half.

The Hudson River, where striped bass spawn and winter, has been one of the hardest hit waters. Fish from the upper Hudson, well above the daily intrusion of salt water, have been discovered to have counts running as high as 30 to 35 parts per million. Such fish should be avoided as table fare.

States known to have electrical plants dumping PCBs into the water are New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Georgia, New Jersey, Illinois, Indiana, Connecticut and California.

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The efforts to clean up San Francisco Bay seem to be paying off. Last year the Tyee Club released 5,000 small silver salmon in the bay as an experiment. It was expected that if the Bay was too dirty the fish would flee to cleaner water or die off, but the fish stayed and grew. Many were caught by fishermen. In addition to the hope that the remaining fish will reproduce, the Tyee Club is planning to raise and release more of the silver salmon.

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