Pollution in the seas ANTHONY TUCKER Science Correspondent with a few embarrassing questions about Britain's dead seals

Is Nancekuke really innocent?

YESTERDAY the Ministry of Agriculture came to a decision [illegible] of unnatural causes on the corpses of the [illegible] seal pups it [illegible] Truro until [illegible] examined. The tests is the findings in post-mortem examinations that, although [illegible] of the seven had died [illegible] a pneumonia infection, [illegible] condition died of malnutrition. The pups' emaciation is [illegible] a normal happening [illegible] where [illegible] substantially stray from [illegible] weights in the Farne [illegible] colony the normal [illegible] weight is 25 [illegible] and the Ministry [illegible] that the high [illegible] reported in [illegible] have not been [illegible].

The immediate figure, these [illegible] by or reported to the [illegible] sanctuary at St Agnes, [illegible] roughly ten times the [illegible] annual toll. Although it may seem proper to blame [illegible] that the usual four pups a year have strayed and starved, it is rather more difficult to extrapolate the assumption to what seems to be a near total kill. The Ministry, however, having only seen seven, seems quite happy.

"The truth is that malnutrition is a description of a condition and it tells nothing of the cause. Were the pups weathered, and if so by what? At this early age—from a few days to three weeks old—the pups would be feeding entirely on milk and, as in other mammals, it is normally the mother which suffers malnutrition, not the offspring. With the Ministry of Defence Nancekuke nerve gas manufactory pushing effluent out of Portreath the possibility of an accidental spillage seemed real enough 10 days ago. Since then, at a press conference of the Natural Environment Research Council, it was stated that Nancekuke had been eliminated.

How? If there had been a spillage it would most probably have been so tremendous that even a relatively difficult to detect and fairly rapidly hydrolysed organophosphate like sarin would be necessary to find it, and the signposts to a changed level of cholinesterase for example—necessitate an intimate knowledge of seal pup biochemistry. No tests of this kind have, in fact, been carried out. This suggests that the NERC exoneration of Nancekuke is based, not on knowledge, but on inter-departmental magic.

NERC has now asked for liver samples to be sent from Truro to the Scottish Fresh Water Research Station at Pitlochry where organo-chlorine analyses—that is for DDT, DDE and PCB's—will be carried out. Ignoring the time-lag and the fact that no samples have yet arrived at Pitlochry (although they are expected some time this week) this is a sensible step, although there is nothing to suggest that there has been a surge of organochlorine compounds off the Cornish coast.

A spokesman for NERC yesterday echoed the Ministry of Agriculture reassurances that the seal deaths were the result of "natural causes". Since malnutrition could well be the result of poisoning it is absolutely necessary, in the present climate of concern about coastal pollution, to eliminate properly all other potential causes before falling back on the most comforting.

But, whether or not the seal kill is the result of pollution or natural causes, the whole problem of coastal pollution is not being tackled with the vigour it deserves. There is still a feeling that the oceans are vast and largely unaffected by man's accumulating toxic rubbish. This is simply not true. As a recent paper from the famous Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute has pointed out, vast areas of ocean are deserts from a productivity point of view.

It is the shallow coastal areas which matter. And it is those which we are despoiling. Concern about the seal pups, like that for the isolated fish kill off the Lizard, may be symptomatic of nothing more than an increased awareness of danger. But they could be first symptoms of a deadly sickness. It is important that we know the truth and this will not be discovered by making easy assumptions.

CHEMICAL BIRD KILLER

By MICHAEL MORDEN

UNCONTROLLED dumping of waste chemicals in the Irish Sea might be responsible for the recent deaths of thousands of sea birds, fish and seals along the West coast, the Ministry of Agriculture said last night.

Ministry research teams suspect that a synthetic lubricant known as PCB (polychlorinated biphenyl) and used by the paint and plastic industries could be the cause of the slaughter.

PCB, previously regarded as non-toxic, has been discharged in the sea at will.

Regulations stipulate that waste chemicals must be dumped in depths over 2,000 fathoms.

Recent research has shown high timbers of sea birds found washed ashore on the West Coast contained the equivalent of 1 PCB. It is thought now that some chemical might now be affecting fish and seals.

MONS 030744