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EARTHBOUND

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Three years ago I was finishing a lecture series about the ecology of the Hudson River. I decided to complete the series by inviting Robert H. Boyle, the writer and senior editor of Sports Illustrated to speak at the last session. He came and spoke to the group from the depths of what was a unique wit and visionary indignation. He talked about the work, or non-work, of state government officials as that related to water resources.

Boyle is a very funny man. He uses his acid humor to bring points home and has about as much respect for double-talking bureaucrats as Johnny Bench for a tortoise on his way to second. He's one of the fine writers of our time, making valuable and insightful comments on one aspect or another of our attitude about our environment. I class him with Tom Wicker, Norman Mailer, Art Buchwald, Jack Newfield, Jimmy Breslin and others like them—writers with imagination, intuition and appreciation for the intelligence and good sense of the working people.

When Bob was finished discussing the pros and cons—largely cons—of electric power projects up and down rivers in this part of the country, he concluded by showing us a few slides about a subject none of us had ever heard of before—PCBs. PCBs? was there another environmental hazard on the horizon to be digested by the minds of us already quite stuffed intellectually with bio-chemical bills of fare?

There was. PCB stands for polychlorinated biphenols. These are chemicals, very long-lived like the pernicious DDT, very stable once in the environment and very difficult to trace in its movement through food chains and individual metabolic systems.

Boyle went on the explain that PCBs are used by industries in the manufacture of a variety of consumer products including brake linings, adhesives and electronic capacitators. They have been on the market and in use for some 30 years but were only discovered as a growing threat to our already-damaged environment in the early 1960s by a Swedish scientist named Jensen. PCBs are discharged directly from factories into adjoining water bodies and are also placed as waste into municipal dumps. Rainfall closest stream or rivulet which leads to lakes and rivers. Both these steps bring the chemical into wildlife food chains.

Polychlorinated biphenols are understood by biologists today to have an extremely harmful effect on marine life. The extent of this effect is still being determined and is complicated by the difficulty of tracing the chemical through metabolisms and reproductive cycles. However, several cases of human mortality in Japan have been closely documented and traced definatively to the effects of ingesting PCB chemicals.

Last week the Commissioner of Environmental Protection of the State of New York declared that until the effects of dangerously high levels of PCBs found in salmon and striped bass in the Hudson estuary can be determined, these fish should not be eaten by citizens.

Bob Boyle's three-year old warning had come to fruition, and since many of the fish of both these species consumed by metropolitan New Yorkers and New Jerseyans spend some of their lives (spawning and overwintering) in the Hudson, who knows which we can eat and which we can't. Fish aren't labeled 'in the market according to where they spent the winter!!