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WILD LIFE

Dead Birds and Hot Air

A rumour that some of the dead seabirds from the Irish Sea contained "possibly significant" quantities of polychlorinated biphenyls was one of the few positive results to emerge from a meeting to discuss progress in investigating the 10,000 deaths held at the Natural Environment Research Council in London on October 24. No single cause, however, will yet account for the situation. Much of the meeting's value lay in stopping paths of speculation – apparent false alarms of dead seals or effects on fish and plankton – and emphasizing instead the continuing search for infection or pollution.

The evidence for the biphenyls, which are industrial wastes, came from the Nature Conservancy's Monks Wood Experimental Station. One of the difficulties in assessing whether the materials may be involved is the lack of information about their distribution and toxicity, but it so happens that Monks Wood conducts routine monitorings of concentrations in guillemot eggs from the Irish Sea area. These measurements provided a background against which the amounts (of the order of hundreds of parts per million) in dead guillemots have stood out sharply, and so have justified the ascription of significance.

There is, however, controversy over the question of just what is signified. It is clearly not possible to draw general conclusions, because only nine birds have been analysed. The issue is whether the concentration that has been found could be regarded as toxic. One investigator thinks that biphenyls may be merely a fashion – a new compound has turned up, so everybody is making a fuss, although, given sufficiently sensitive measurements, practically any industrial compound could be found. Certainly no direct link has been identified between biphenyls and the present deaths; but, on the other hand, there is evidence from elsewhere that may point at least towards a correlation.

This concerns measurements reported in *Nature* (**224**, 247; 1969) of biphenyls in white-tailed eagles from the Baltic. The population of this species is falling, the birds analysed were dead and the biphenyl concentration was of the same order as that in the samples from the Irish Sea. What is not clear, however, is the relationship between toxic concentrations for eagles and guillemots, and there are still no grounds for anti-pollutionists to proclaim a new scapegoat.

In the United States the Monsanto Company, which manufactures products containing PCBs, has investigated their toxic effect on rats, and during 90 day studies a concentration of 100 parts per million apparently gave no adverse results. This, of course, need imply nothing about what happened to guillemots with a similar dose. Present work at Monks Wood on the toxicology of these compounds to birds may give some of the answers. The pathologists, however, have yet to come up with details of possible infections among the birds, and the London meeting also pointed to the likely role of severe gales coinciding with the auks' moulting period, so that PCBs may turn out to be another dead end.

The lack of organization surrounding the whole affair, reflected in the slowness of getting results (first reports of deaths were in mid-September), does raise the question of whether there should have been some kind of emergency service to coordinate investigations, which have been mainly voluntary. For example, should NERC itself supply someone to be responsible for linking suitable establishments to look into any large-scale natural disaster as soon as the first evidence appears? This time, much of the initiative, organized with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, and only after work was well under way of its own accord were the participants officially brought together.

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