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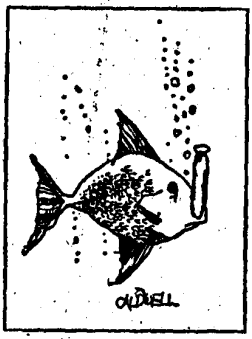
Letters to the E

PCB's: 'We Must Not Overreact'

To the Editor:

As a fisheries biologist, I find the controversy over the impact of PCB's on the biota of the Hudson River somewhat lacking in objectivity.

There can be no question that polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB's) are present in the Hudson River. These compounds were initially dumped in



a publicly accepted refuse area, the Hudson Estuary, before the biological value of that river or the harm of PCB's was comprehendable. It matters little today who authorized the dumping of PCB's in the past. We are smarter now and should manage finite resources through the strength of knowledge rather than through a precedent set in ignorance.

PCB's carry the potential of immense harm to man's environment. This potential for harm should not cloud rational thought. We must not overreact before we comprehend the situation. The banning of commercial fishing in the Hudson for the spring of 1976, understandably a safety measure, was nevertheless initiated without adequate knowledge at hand. There is no evidence that the complex migrations of fish constituting the commercial fisheries were taken into consideration when the decision to ban was made in 1975. There is no evidence that we comprehend the situation any better today.

The PCB crisis will inevitably give way to another environmental crisis. (Remember the cranberry and mercury scares.) Although PCB's exist in the river environment, it does not necessarily follow that these compounds can be effectively removed. As we contemplate the cost of dredging the river bottom, do we really know where in that complex ecosystem these materials would congregate? Would agitation of that system stir up as much trouble as it removes? We would be wiser to spend available money in an effort to better comprehend the situation.

Why not require the disseminators of PCB's to fund fisheries research rather than to foot the bill for unproven cleanup activities? Research funds could support the very commercial fishermen who are now losing a major portion of their livelihood because of PCB's. Such a research program would cost less than a cleanup endeavor and would certainly be an easier pill to take for those who unintentionally caused the problem.

A mistake has been made. It must be rectified in a manner that will make us wiser when confronted by the next river crisis or a prolongation of this crisis.

In the meantime, a warning, such as that placed on tobacco, would convey an accurate state of our knowledge with respect to PCB's.

WILLIAM L. DOVEL
Yonkers, Aug. 27, 1976

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