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The Story Of PCB And What It Did To Fish

By NEIL ELLIS

Some 20 years ago I watched a Canadian resort owner fertilize his inland garden with tons of jacks (northern pike), some of trophy size, and became I knew the trout usually got his corn, tomatoes and squash long before he had a chance to harvest them. I thought: "What a waste!"

Then, of course, I would never have guessed that the same thing might happen on a much grander scale right here in the United States. But yesterday I read about how the state of Michigan disposed of a million pounds of fish — mostly trout and salmon — each longer than 21 inches — by burying them.

The resort owner who fertilized his garden on the shores of Canada's Long Legged (sometimes called Shark) lake, did so because of their time worthiness, plus in most Canadian waters, considered trash. Rocky cliffs where destroyed as we dumped "rock" to make way for more desirable species like walleyed pike and trout (lake trout) — and also to improve transportation. Still, every time a truckload of jacks came to the fertilized zone it stood better and thicker, and the garden, I think, has took pleasure.

TODAY THE MOOSE has received some praise in Canada, but in many waters is eagerly sought. Meanwhile, his cousin, the whitetail, the lake, brook, speckled and rainbow trouts, and the coho and chinook salmon, have fallen victim to PCB (polychlorinated biphenyls).

It's a tragic story. Long before American biologists considered seriously taking inland fish, and developing fish, many millions of productive of trout fish on our waters any. Then, in the world, PCB was discovered, a world-wide villain. But the villainous wasn't immediately recognized.

PCB had a quiet beginning. In 1930, a chemical company developed a method of making an insulating material for electrical transformers which wouldn't crack or burn.

IT DID. Monsanto Chemical Co. took over the company in 1938 and went on to make several PCBs, and early studies saw no harm in it. PCB spills were hosed down drains. PCB drained from damaged transformers was often mixed with fuel oil as a vehicle for weed killing sprays.

There were many other uses, even such as coating the inside of silos, until someone discovered that the PCB was getting into the milk through the silage the animals.

Other companies were allowed to take over PCB and it got into specialty printing inks, adhesives, coating for carbonless reproduction paper, hydraulic fluids, special paints, resins, solvents, etc., etc.

MEANWHILE, fisheries biologists, especially in Michigan, began to experiment with salmon and trout plantings in Lake Michigan. Expecting only moderate success, they were astonished when lake, rainbow, brown and speckled trout, and coho and "run of the mill" chinook salmon not only survived, but flourished.



THE NORTHERN PIKE DESTINED FOR FERTILIZER

To understand and appreciate this miracle, you must be a fisherman. The trout and salmon are to the world of the fisherman what caviar is to the gourmet.

Anglers had been spending great sums of money to travel to distant places as they might fish for those species. Then, all of a sudden, like a dream come true, right here in the backwards of millions was hot for fishing these might be found in most other parts of the world. Hundreds of thousands of anglers from everywhere flocked in to harvest the bonanza.

But now, back to the villain PCB. Quite suddenly too, it began turning up in fish tissues around the world. Then PCB was found to lead to cancer in rats. It was also found to hinder the reproduction powers of fish.

IN 1970, Monsanto began phasing out orders where it had no control of PCB's usage. It offered to buy back PCB's for destruction for recycling. It instituted safety measures to eliminate spillage.

But, along with mercury which is another poison which pollutes the waters of fish and animals, PCB was already infecting the finny inhabitants of this Great Lakes sudden fishing fairyland.

The government, of course, stepped in. The Federal Drug Administration put the safety margin in foods at five parts per million. It also rated PCB as only mildgrately toxic as compared to such other poisons as DDT.

NOW EVERY effort is being made to get NO more PCB into our ecosystems. The trouble is, it is already there and will not quickly go away since it deteriorates as slowly in water.

According to W. B. Papageorge, of Monsanto Chemical Co., "The mistake of the last 40 years will be with us a long time. That could mean decades."

So what about the millions of fishermen who across the country are taking fish having a measurable amount of PCB?

WELL, SO FAR as the fish in Lakes Superior and Michigan are concerned, a marketing ban has been observed by the state of Michigan and Wisconsin. The distribution of sport fish from which these states have milked milk and roe for their hatcheries is prohibited, and no millions of fish are buried.

As for the sport fishermen, the rule has generally been that fish which measure less than 21 inches (feed eating size) are considered safe. It is the consensus of biologists, from repeated tests, that they have not been around long enough to suggest such quantities of PCB as are injurious to humans.

But what about those huskier fish? Those world record-breaking monsters which anglers are derricking in?

"Throw it mounted. Hang the wall to look at." Is the advice of some biologists.

"But I already have one hanging on the wall of my den," some fishermen complain.

"Maybe then," the biologists say, "until we know more about PCB, you'd just better let the fish go."

PRETTY HARD words, because what's the fun of fishing if you can't bring a trophy fish home, show it to friends, and then throw a bash with beer and baked fish to make them memorable the day of your triumph.

Well, of course, the angler might follow the example set by my fishing friend on Ontario's Long Legged lake. He might bring his trophy home, get a picture of it, and then dig it into the garden to fertilize his tomatoes and beans.

But what an ignominious way to go for a champion, a record breaker, a trophy fish. And what a sad, sad story — especially if you're a fisherman — because now, in almost all waters that the villain PCB has made forsaken, the chemical, along with mercury, is being injected into the watery tissues of those fish you've had such a great time catching.

The Good Earth

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