

# Rachel's Environment & Health News

## #32 - Three New Reports Describe Our Destruction Of The Ocean's Fish

July 05, 1987

Eating fish is good for you, if the fish you eat are not polluted. Fish are high in protein, and fish oil helps prevent heart disease and rheumatoid arthritis. In recent decades, concern for a healthy diet has led Americans to eat more and more fish; on average, we consume 17 or 18 pounds of fish per person per year (a total of 2.7 billion pounds of fish per year). Of course, many people eat more fish than the average.

Now three recent reports offer shocking news about the increasingly-polluted condition of America's fish and fisheries, especially the coastal and estuarine areas of the ocean, where the bulk of America's fish are harvested. Even more shocking is the documented failure of federal, state and local governments to regulate industrial dumping into the nation's fishing waters.

By 1990, says the U.S. Bureau of the Census, 75% of the American people will live on or near the coasts. Human activity is putting tremendous pressure on the oceans--from industrial dumping, the dumping of contaminated municipal sewage, and toxic runoff from municipal streets and from pesticide-treated farmlands.

For example, the National Status and Trends Program of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) recently released the first in a series of technical reports, revealing high levels of toxic lead and cadmium in Boston Harbor, Salem Harbor (MA), and Narragansett Bay (RI), Raritan Bay (NY and NJ), western Long Island (NY and CT), San Diego harbor (CA), and San Pablo Bay and Hunter's Point in the San Francisco Bay estuary. The same report points to chromium contamination in areas along the northeast Atlantic Coast and in San Francisco Bay. Copper contamination is evident at the northeast Atlantic Coast at the same sites noted for lead and cadmium, but now we add Elliott Bay and Commencement Bay in Puget Sound (WA). Mercury contamination is highest in Salem and Boston Harbors, and at Seal Beach, California.

Organic compounds are even more widespread than the inorganic metals. Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), a group of petroleum derivatives, several of which are known human carcinogens--are found in high concentrations in Boston, Salem, Narragansett Bay, Raritan Bay, western Long Island Sound, and San Diego Harbor, but they are also found in the Casco River in Maine, the Merrimack River (MA), Buzzard's Bay (near Cape Cod in MA), in Delaware Bay (NJ, PA and DE), in the lower Chesapeake Bay (MD and VA), in the St. Johns River (FL), in the Mississippi River delta (AL, MS, and LA) in several parts of San Francisco Bay, and in Commencement and Elliott Bays. It is not quite (or not yet) true that the entire coast of the U.S. is contaminated with cancer-causing PAHs, but it is true that every part of our coastal waters has "hot spots" that are severely contaminated with these exotic, dangerous chemicals. These chemicals inevitably concentrate in the fish, which make their way to our dinner plates.

NOAA will be releasing more details about contaminants in the nation's coastal waters and fish in the fall of 1987. To remain aware of these developments, contact: John A. Calder, National Status and Trends Program, NOAA, Office of Oceanography, Rockville, MD 20852; phone (301) 443-8655.

Where do these pollutants come from? The U.S. Congress's Office of Technology Assessment recently released *Wastes in Marine Environments*, which can serve as an excellent reference book for anyone who takes ocean pollution seriously. It tries to pull together in one place (a) the laws and regulations covering ocean dumping, (b) an inventory of waste sources, state by state; (c) economic benefits derived from use of the oceans for commercial fishing and for recreation; (d) the different types of marine (ocean) environments and how they react to pollution; (e) the impacts of waste pollutants on human health; (f) programs intended to control industrial pollution; (g) programs intended to control municipal sewage pollution.

The OTA report says, "In the absence of additional measures, new or continued degradation will occur in many estuaries and some coastal waters around the country during the next few decades (even in some areas that exhibited improvement in the past)."

The report is fully documented, with a bibliography of 713 published sources. Anyone interested in the oceans will benefit from owning this mild-mannered, 312-page report. *Wastes in Marine Environments* is available for \$13.00 from U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402; ask for document No. 052-003-01062-3. Visa, Mastercard and Choice charge cards accepted; phone (202) 783-3238.

Bringing a more critical eye to bear on ocean pollution is the Coastal Alliance, a group of scientists and lawyers devoted to protecting the nation's marine resources. They have undertaken an assessment of "the state of the sea," starting with New England where so much of the nation's commercial fish originate. They asked three marine scientists to review all the information collected during the past 20 years about chemical contamination of New England's fish and shellfish. The contamination is disturbing, but what is worse is the picture that emerges of government failure. At every level, regulatory programs have failed to prevent massive dumping of toxic chemicals into fisheries. After contamination is allowed to occur, monitoring programs are too small to pinpoint the dangers, to warn people away from eating contaminated fish. For example, the federal Food and Drug Administration collected just 51 samples of fish products on U.S. markets in 1981, and only 921 samples in 1982. Even at the 1982 level, the FDA program looked for chemical contamination in less than one one-thousandth of one percent of the fish sold in U.S. markets that year.

"Most seafood in New England is not dangerous to eat," says author Paul Hauge, "but there are pockets of contamination that can make a trip to the fish store a game of Russian roulette.... We must break the habit of thinking of the sea as a dump."

The Coast Alliance can be reached at 218 D Street, SE, Washington, DC 20003; phone (202) 466-5045, but the short report, *Contamination of New England's Fish and Shellfish* is available free from the Conservation Law Foundation, 3 Joy Street, Boston, MA 02108; phone (617) 742-2540; the Foundation is also distributing the full scientific study upon which the shorter report is based, free while supplies last.

--Peter Montague

=====

Descriptor terms: studies; shellfish; finfish; ota; statistics; coast alliance; conservation law foundation; fda; food safety; pcbs; pesticides; noaa; doc; national status and trends program; boston harbor; salem, ma; narragansett bay, ri; raritan bay, nj; long island sound; san diego harbor; casco river, me; ca; ma; nj; ny; de; delaware bay; md; va; chesapeake bay; pa; merrimack river; buzzard's bay; ri; st john's river, fl; mississippi river; ms; al; la; san francisco bay; commencement bay, wa; elliot bay, wa; wa; pahs; san pablo bay, ca; hunter's point, ca; seal beach, ca; copper; lead; mercury; estuaries;