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Short Environmental Updates

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A newborn Gray Whale in the San Ignacio Lagoon, Baja, California,
the last Gray Whale nursery in North America © 1999 by
Frank Balthis, Natural Resources Defense Council.

Earthfiles, news category.

November 18, 1999

Orca Whales Contaminated by Ocean Chemical Pollution

Orca "killer whales" throughout the world are now contaminated by a poison that the United States and Canada banned twenty years ago, but other countries such as Russia still use. That poison is PCBs, poly chlorinated biphenyls, once used everywhere for cooling and insulating electrical transformers and coloring newspaper comics. PCBs were even sprayed on country roads to keep dust down. Dr. Rob Macdonald, an oceanographer for the Canadian Institute of Ocean Sciences in Sidney, British Columbia, says "the PCB paintbrush has covered the globe." Marine scientists are concerned that the oceans are so polluted with the dangerous chemicals.

In an up-coming *Marine Pollution Bulletin*, Canadian scientists describe how orcas now rank as the most contaminated cetacean in the world, partly because they eat other marine life whose fatty tissues are filled with PCBs. High PCB concentrations damage immune systems. The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada this April listed the northern Pacific Ocean's resident orcas as threatened. The population has dropped more than ten percent in the past three years.

PCBs are among sixteen organic pollutants that European countries in the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe have finally agreed to ban. Further, the United Nation's Environment Program is working on a proposal for a worldwide ban of several organic pollutants, including PCBs.

Gray Whales Threatened

Gray Whales are also threatened by a proposal of the Mitsubishi Corporation of Japan and the Mexican government to transform 116 square miles of Baja, California's San Ignacio's shoreline into a massive salt factory. San Ignacio is the last lagoon on earth where the Gray Whales can breed and give birth in peace. The industrial goal is to build large evaporation ponds to produce salt that would be delivered to ocean tankers docked along a mile-long pier constructed directly across the path of the Gray Whales. The Natural Resources Defense Council and other environmental groups are trying to focus worldwide attention on this new threat to Gray Whales.

Nuclear Plant Safety in the Face of Y2K

On Friday, the Senate Special Committee on the Y2K Technology Problems released a letter sent to the Chairman of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission which in part states: "With only seven weeks until the Y2K rollover, the nuclear industry has yet to satisfy the Senate's, the GAO's and the public's fundamental concerns regarding potential devastating mishaps which could even lead to multiple meltdowns after New Year's."

The letter asked for a description of the process by which NRC will make a final determination as to which nuclear plants, if any, will be shut down over safety concerns during the year 2000 rollover. The deadline for response was Monday, November 15th and nuclear industry watchdogs report the NRC response is inadequate.

Crop Formation "Humming" Sound

There is news from Canada about crop formations and more unusual cat killings. Paul Anderson, Director of Circle Phenomena in Canada, Investigator Patrick Cross reports that in this new formation, he and others could hear an unusual "humming" sound. They tried three compasses and an electromagnetic frequency monitor. All the instruments responded oddly at the same time and their various cameras failed to operate inside the formation. And a white substance like cobwebs was found beneath some of the corn stalks. Local Royal Canadian Mounted Police gathered samples for lab analyses.

More Cat Mutilations In Canada

Also in Canada, two more Humane Societies are trying to cope with unusual cat mutilations beyond Toronto. The Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario Animal Shelter has received half a dozen reports in the past few weeks and so has the Saskatoon SPCA in Saskatchewan. It's more half cats and mutilated cats similar to what's been happening in Toronto; San Jose, California; Ft. Worth, Texas; and London, England.

The first report in Sault St. Marie was a cat found "cut in half," said Cindy Ross, Manager of the Humane Society's Animal Shelter, (705) 949-3573. "There was no blood, no fur, nothing around it. It looked very deliberately placed. It looked like a very sharp knife was used. I am just baffled. This is the first in my experience. You get calls all the time of cats hit by a car. But this is something else." The city police have been notified and a \$500 reward offered for information. A \$60,000 reward has also been offered by the Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals for information about ten mutilated cats in the Toronto area. Anyone with information is asked to call Inspector Debbie Hunt at the Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) at (416) 410-4836.

In the larger environment of the cosmos, at the beginning of November 1999 at the University of California in Santa Cruz, astronomers detected a wobble in a star about 153 light years from earth in the constellation Pegasus. The scientists predicted the wobble was caused by a large planet that would cross between the star and earth on November 7th. As predicted, the star's brightness dropped nearly two percent for a period of time. The conclusion is that this was the first direct evidence of a planet outside our solar system. Based on the dimming, the astronomers calculate that the orbiting planet is gaseous and larger than Jupiter and is so close to the star that its surface is too hot for life.

Websites:

<http://www.nrdc.org/>

<http://y2k.senate.gov/news/pr991116.htm>

<http://schwab.tsuniv.edu/t8/hd209458/transit.html>

<http://cfa-www.harvard.edu/iau/cbat.html>

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