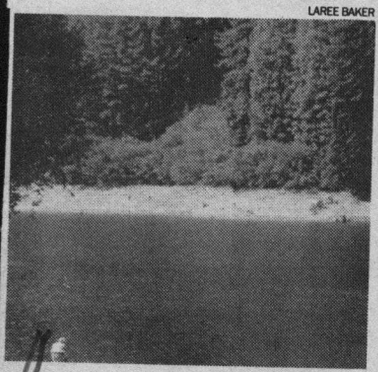
LAREE BAKER



Environment

Toxic Chemical Ripples Through Loch Lomond

FIFTY thousand dead fish floating on the surface of Kelly Lake in Watsonville have drawn attention to what biologists believe is the smoking gun: a common algae killer called copper sulfate. The toxic chemical is not limited to small private lakes such as Kelly, however, but is used in the county's largest public reservoir, Loch Lomond.

Loch Lomond reservoir above Ben Lomond is well known as a recreational haven for boaters, swimmers and fishermen, as well as a major source of the tap water supply for the city of Santa Cruz. But for two days in June the lake was shut down and turned into a dumping pond for 7,000 pounds of copper sulfate.

Copper sulfate treatment is considered acceptable by the state as a means of eliminating the algae that forms naturally at the reservoir every few months. The same chemical, however, is used as an herbicide and is toxic to laboratory animals when ingested under the skin.

Despite the acknowledged toxicity of the chemical, city water treatment officials staunchly defend its introduction into the local drinking water supply.

"It's a safe treatment because of the very low concentration," said Terry Tompkins, city water quality manager. "Seven thousand pounds sounds like a lot, but when you dump it into a two billion gallon lake, the final analysis of copper sulfate is less than 10 parts per billion, which is easily below the danger level and poses no threat at all."

The presence of algae in the lake is normal, Tompkins said.

"In a natural lake it's a fact of life. It gradually builds up, and we apply the copper sulfate treatment two or three times a year. Algae doesn't really pose a danger. The problem is mainly taste and smell at the surface level."

Apparently, the copper sulfate treatment hasn't aroused the ire of the local Sierra Club, who normally keep their eyes on such matters. Sierra Club spokesperson Hal Levin said that although copper sulfate "is not a mild chemical," there is no recourse as long as its concentration is kept below state standards. •

—Kevin Hanson