

Cuttlebone Does Not Appear Affected By Toxins In Waters

Feeding pet birds cuttlebone hasn't proven to be a risky action.

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In a world where pollution levels are high, eating a carrot or piece of chicken could mean ingesting a fork full of chemicals. Many consumers have placed an emphasis on eating organic to limit the "bad stuff" we put into our bodies, but how much thought has gone into what we feed our birds?

A team of researchers working on the "Marine Pollution Bulletin" has been studying a pool of toxins found in the ocean, specifically, those chemicals affects on cephalopods – the family of animals to which the cuttlefish belongs, which has raised concern to pet bird owners.

Cuttlebone is given to birds as a source of minerals and calcium. But the question arises, could the birds be ingesting a melting pot of persistent organic pollutants as well?

According to Michael Vecchione, a cephalopod biologist contributing to the research, animals such as squids and octopi, cousins of the cuttlefish, have lipid storage areas in their bodies where they store up the chemicals with no way of getting rid of them. These animals live in the deep seawaters of the ocean, where these chemicals – TBT, DPE and PCD to name a few – have been floating stagnant for decades.

Vecchione said he has focused his study mainly on squid and octopi, so little is known about whether the toxins are having the same affect on cuttlefish, which tend to live in the shallower coastal waters, such as in continental shelves and upper slopes.

"My gut feeling on it is that it is probably not a problem. I think it would be more likely that you'd get a contaminated cuttlebone if it was one that had been washed up on the beach that had been floating around, if there were pollutants in the water that they were floating in," Vecchione said. "Most come from animals that were caught for food, and the cuttlebone was kept as an extra product that they could sell."

At this point, according to Vecchione, the research on the cephalopods is not far enough along to say whether the toxins could harm species that eat these affected cephalopods.

Dick Schroeder, manager of the bird-feed supply company Cuttlebone PLUS, broke down the make-up of a piece of cuttlebone for a 2004 BIRD TALK magazine article, and found no amounts of chemicals that would be harmful to birds.

Schroeder said he has not seen any harmful affects of cuttlebones on the birds or mealworms he feeds it to.

"I always have a large piece of it in the container that houses my mealworms. As they eat it they become gut-loaded with calcium therefore being more nutritious for my softbills that consume them," Shroeder said. "I would think if there were any toxins I'd have dead mealworms, and it isn't the case."