

On the Mercury Trail: Tale of Two Reporters

By Tony Bartelme , Doug Pardue
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One reporter eats no fish, the other eats fish every third meal.

One reporter tests negative for mercury, the other's is sky high.

Getting our hair tested was one of the fringe benefits of working on the story about mercury and its effects on people in South Carolina, but the oddest part of doing this story was asking people to give up some of their hair.

Over a span of about 8 months, we traveled a dozen times to two areas in South Carolina with rivers containing mercury-tainted fish.

Then we looked for people who ate these fish and asked them for cuttings of their hair.

Doing so immediately made for some interesting conversations.

"I thought you were bringing some pizza, and now you want some hair," joked one man along the Edisto, drinking beers with his buddies.

Others half-joked that they thought we were police looking to do some drug samples.

One young man on the Little Pee Dee warned others not to give us hair samples because we were trying to get their DNA for some nefarious reason.

Most politely declined, or said they didn't eat much fish.

But a surprising number agreed to let us cut their hair and send the samples to lab.

Most who agreed were curious whether they had mercury. Many were skeptical about the state's fish advisories. Some said that even if the samples came back high, they would still keep eating fish.

With scissors in hand, we gave people some bad haircuts. A few strands wouldn't do. The lab required enough hair to tip a small paper scale they sent us.

Getting enough hair on some men was particularly challenging. One of our volunteers used clippings from his daily shaves to get enough.

After all our trips to the Edisto and Little Pee Dee rivers, the temptation to test our own hair was too strong, so we sent off our samples, justifying it by saying it would be an interesting experiment in itself. (We didn't include our samples in our overall results.) That's because Tony is allergic to fish and breaks out in hives if he has more than a few bites. His test: 0.2 parts per million, way below the EPA's safety benchmark of 1 part per million.

Doug, on the other hand, eats seafood nearly every other day. He loves tuna steaks and grouper. His hair sample came back 3.6 parts per million, close to four times EPA's benchmark. He's stopped eating certain fish for now.

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