

Red Seas, Dead Seaweed

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By Kate Spinner

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Two months ago, scientists predicted area beaches would be strewn with globs of red seaweed and their premonition might be on the way to coming true.

From Naples to Sanibel, dead seaweed is undulating in the surf zone and emanating a mild stench, but it's not nearly as massive a problem as it was three years ago, when it accumulated knee deep on some area beaches.

"Compared to years where we've actually had to have rakes out there to get it off the beach, this is not bad," said Rhonda Watkins, environmental specialist for Collier County Pollution Control. She and other environmental scientists said they have no idea whether the problem will be getting worse.

"It's at the mercy of the wind and current," Watkins said.

Red-drift algae, a non-toxic seaweed that is actually edible, grows offshore on rocks or on the hard shells of worms that live in the sand.

"Other than being a nuisance, and it might cling to your legs and feel strange, it's not harmful," Watkins said.

Visible through the gin-clear water out in the Gulf of Mexico, the seaweed is growing in thick patches offshore from the Lover's Key/Carl E. Johnson boat ramp to Fort Myers beach.

Rick Bartleson, estuarine scientist with the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation, said a lot of nutrients entered the coastal system last year. Red algae, which can be several feet thick, has been washing up on area shores, working its way from Sanibel to other areas in Southwest Florida.

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Like all other algae, red-drift algae thrives on nutrients such as phosphorus and nitrogen, which are found in stormwater runoff from urban and agricultural areas. Last year, the Gulf received a massive nutrient load from hurricane runoff and from the 696 billion gallons of water the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers released from Lake Okeechobee to the Caloosahatchee River.

The murky water from the lake and the run-off also damaged sea grass beds near the mouth of the river and in San Carlos Bay, making nutrient problems worse.

"If the beds were as dense as they used to be they could be helping by removing nutrients from the available pool," Bartleson said.

In addition to the large quantity of algae, Bartleson said it is a bit unusual to see it this time of year.

Red-drift algae usually flourishes in cooler waters, he said. Brooke DeMarco, left, and Tara Underwood lounge just off the shore near large patches of red algae at Fort Myers Beach on Wednesday afternoon. The red algae, which can be several feet thick, has been washing up on area shores, working its way from Sanibel to other areas in Southwest Florida.

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Three years ago, during the winter months the beaches were strewn with so much algae that Lee County and other municipalities shelled out \$270,000 to remove it from the shore.

Keith Kibbey, a scientist with Lee County Environmental Lab, made a guess in March that nutrients from voluminous lake releases last year would trigger an algae outbreak akin to what happened in 2003. Before that outbreak, the Corps released more than 400 billion gallons of Lake Okeechobee water to the Gulf.

So far, Kibbey said, he can't say his prediction has come true.

"I don't think there's enough out there yet," Kibbey said. "I've seen pictures of a lot off Sanibel, but most of it is staying in the surf zone. It's not washing ashore in big wads."

While the problem has not yet reached the proportions that Kibbey predicted, it is starting to bug the beach bums.

John Linebarger, a resident of Fort Myers Beach, lounged just yards from the surf zone at beach access 19 Tuesday afternoon.

"I'm a beach bum. I just like the beach. I like to be in the water. I like to hear the sound of the water," Linebarger said, adding that he could endure the seaweed as long as it didn't rise to the level it did three years ago. "It doesn't smell that much. Every once in a while you get a whiff."

Jeff Reid, 16, was trying to skim board in front of the Lani Kai, where the algae stretched out a couple feet from the lapping surf zone.

"It makes the beach look bad," Reid said. "It kind of kills the skim boarding too."

The accumulation of algae can also take a toll on beach business.

Dave Ross, also known as Ice Cream Dave, pushed his vending cart along the wet shoreline Tuesday. He said the algae started showing up at Fort Myers Beach about a week or two ago, after a sizable storm.

"It kind of makes people wonder what's going on with the water," Ross said. He is managing to draw customers, but not as many as usual.

"It deters people from coming to the beach," Ross said. "It hurts a little bit."

Algae deterring people from enjoying the beach is exactly what worries tourist officials.

Tamara Pigott, beach and shoreline project manager for the Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau, said she's keeping an eye on the problem and hoping people don't think it's toxic red tide.

"Of course we want our beach-going experience to be as pleasant as possible. It's unfortunate these events can interfere," Pigott said. "Unfortunately when it dies off it is very odorous and that brown color is not very attractive."