

Sanibel bay fishing dead

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Chugging around Tarpon Bay in his bait-shrimp boat Tuesday, Ralph Woodring's concern was not so much what he saw as what he didn't see.

At this time of year, mullet should be popping out of the water like popcorn.

"I haven't seen a damn mullet jump in over a month," said Woodring, 69, who was born on Sanibel and grew up on Tarpon Bay.

Mullet, however, weren't the only fish conspicuously absent from the bay.

"A few months ago, we had red tide in here real bad, and everything in the bay died — mullet, snook, redfish, trout, everything," said Woodring, who owns the Bait Box on Sanibel. "With red tide, you figure a week or a couple of weeks, and fish will move back in. But nothing came back.

"You see a few small snook around, but there should be 20 times more. Or you see a small snapper here and there, or a few scattered small grouper, but nothing like the numbers you expect to see of anything."

Fish-eating birds — wading birds, cormorants and pelicans — have also been scarce.

"There are no baitfish," he said. "Without bait, the birds don't come."

Strange phenomena in the bay include clear water — the bay is usually murky with plankton — and massive amounts of red macroalgae, often called "rolling moss" by locals.

"The moss is so bad that I go to my favorite spots to run during shrimp season, and I can't even pull out there," Woodring said. "Every pull, I bring in a big mass of it. It takes three hours to catch 1,000 shrimp when I should be catching 1,000 an hour. If you throw a cast net in it, no way you'll get it back."

Red drift algae sit along the shore next to the mangroves Tuesday in Tarpon Bay on Sanibel Island. Locals are concerned that the concentrated amounts of the dead algae, or “rolling tide” as they like to call it, are in some way decreasing fish numbers. Macroalgae have been much in the news this year.

Beginning in January, lower Pine Island Sound was blanketed with a green alga called *Enteromorpha*.

In April, divers from the county’s Division of Natural Resources discovered that many of the artificial reefs in the Gulf of Mexico were coated with an alga called *Cladophora*, and in late spring, other algae, including red algae, moved in.

These algae have three requirements: warm water, lots of light and high concentrations of nutrients.

Over the past couple of years, above average rainfall has forced water managers to release vast amounts of nutrient-laden water from Lake Okeechobee down the Caloosahatchee River.

Another nutrient source is water that runs into the Caloosahatchee from agriculture fields, lawns, golf courses, septic tanks and sewage treatment plants.

“My first guess about what’s going on in Tarpon Bay is that it’s just been pounded for the last few years with an ungodly amount of nutrients,” said Chris Koepfer, a Lee County natural resources supervisor. “The bay is right at the end of the Caloosahatchee, and when you get nutrients in there, they’re not going to come back out, and they’ll feed algae blooms. With the clean water, you get sunlight penetration, and that’s going to continue those blooms.”

As to why so few fish are in the bay, Koepfer didn’t have an answer.

“It’s probably because there’s nothing to eat there,” he said. “The mullet is an interesting thing. They’re algae eaters, but they don’t eat macroalgae. Maybe the macroalgae have dominated the whole system, and the algae the mullet feed on aren’t there. But that’s just a guess.”

On a positive note: Plenty of shrimp are in the bay.

Woodring speculated that’s because all the predators are gone, but Aaron Adams, head of Mote Marine Laboratory’s Charlotte Harbor Field Station, had another idea.

“With the nutrients coming down the Caloosahatchee and from elsewhere, there’s an abundance of organic matter for shrimp to eat,” Adams said. “And in years following red tide, there are often bumper crops of shrimp because they’re eating all the stuff that died.”

Woodring has fished and worked in Tarpon Bay all his life and has never seen it in such bad shape.

“Nothing even comes close,” he said. “The bay is dead. It’s disheartening. It really is.”