

Florida's red tide takes a mounting toll. And it's not just on the fish.

BY JENNY STALETOVICH jstaletovich@miamiherald.com

August 14, 2018 07:37 PM Updated August 15, 2018 04:59 PM

On a cloudless, windless day in Pine Island Sound usually perfect for fishing, Capt. Chad Huff sees something that breaks his heart and threatens his livelihood: an 80- to 100-pound tarpon, probably a dozen years old, scales glistening like armor forged from silver dollars, bobbing on the surface.

Its lifeless body is beginning to bloat. Its eyes, ten thousand times stronger than a human's, have clouded over.

"Horrible," mutters Huff, a second-generation fishing guide. "Eighty percent of what I get paid for is the pursuit of one of these on a fly rod."

Huff hooked his first tarpon with his dad when he was 6 and has spent the years since catching and releasing countless more. The sight of the fish fills him with disgust.

"I can't look at it anymore," he says before motoring away.

Soft-spoken and generally laconic, Huff is not one to wave a political flag or jump into a protest. But a 10-month-long red tide washing up along Southwest Florida, coupled with blue-green algae flushed from Lake Okeechobee past his backyard, have drawn him into the fray. Huff now finds himself joining an increasingly angry public. They've shown up at weekend protests in Sanibel and Sarasota, at a heated meeting last month with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and every day across social media, tired of officials downplaying coastal pollution and simply blaming nature for red tide.



Capt. Chad Huff motors alongside a dead 80- to 100-pound tarpon near Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge in Sanibel on Friday, Aug. 10, 2018.

"It's naturally occurring, but so is cancer," said Randy Wayne White, an author of best-selling novels brimming with Florida's long history of environmental woes, and a former fishing guide. "I have yet to read any statistically provable data that I can say to you, 'This proves that nutrient pollution, fertilizer

pollution, exacerbates red tide.’ But I do know this, having grown up on a farm: If you fertilize something, it grows.”

It takes a lot to kill a tarpon. Anglers who pay \$800 a day to battle the fish may fight them for 15 minutes or an hour, depending on their skill level, only to have them thunder away once freed. Dirty water doesn’t bother them: They congregate daily around commercial docks in Miami Beach and the Keys drawn by discarded fish scraps despite oil slicks and diesel fumes. Babies grow up in brackish water around Florida’s crowded coasts, and adults can migrate hundreds of miles every year from, for example, the Carolinas to the Keys.

But this year’s red tide is another matter. Tarpon that normally flee toxic tides are turning up dead, along with manatees, sea turtles, snook, and other large marine life.

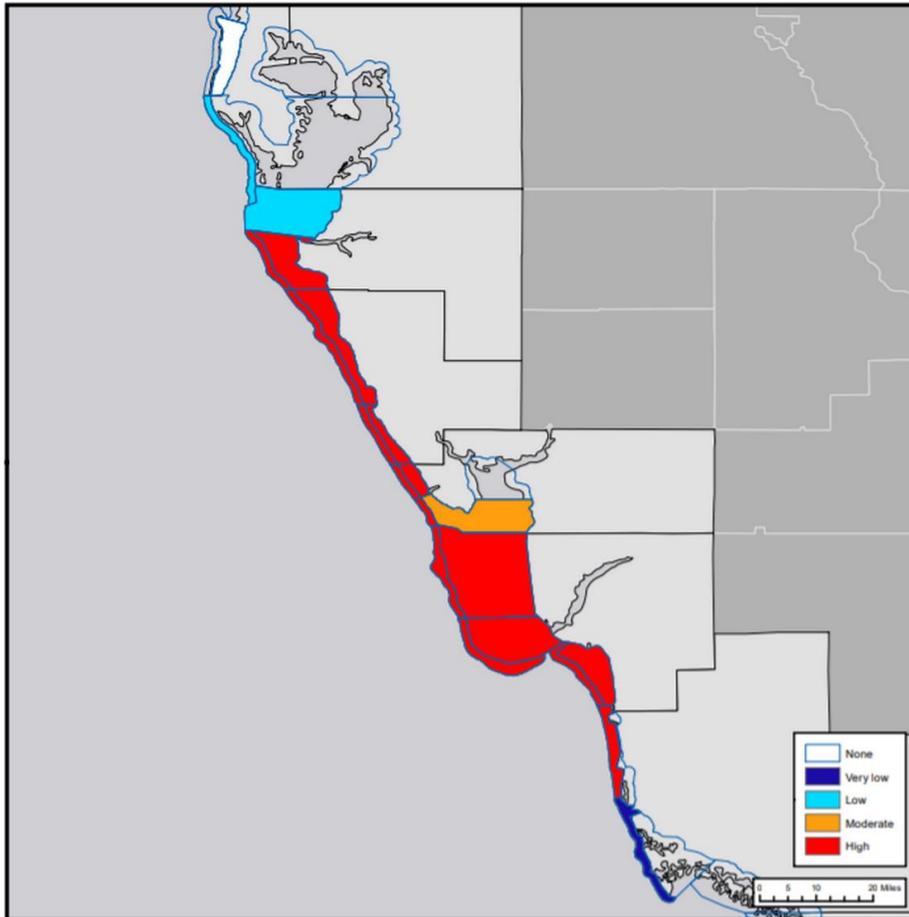


A dead tarpon lies on a bayside beach in Sanibel on Friday, Aug. 10, where city workers collected 267 tons of dead marine life in a week and a half. Another dead tarpon was spotted in San Carlos Bay and a third near Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge.

The tide started in October near Sarasota but intensified after heavy rain increased annual seasonal releases from Lake Okeechobee, where blue-green algae blooms erupted in June. Last week, neon green algae — which can also kill fish, oysters, sea grass and other marine life — continued to pile up in canals in Fort Myers and float in patches down the Caloosahatchee toward the Southwest coast.

As of Tuesday, state wildlife officials had tallied 605 dead and 120 sick sea turtles in seven counties with or near red tide, with 266 confirmed poisonings since November, Mote Marine Lab reported. That’s 1.7 times higher than the five-year average for total strandings. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration had confirmed 22 dolphin deaths, though not all were caused by red tide. That includes 11 collected by Mote last week in Sarasota and Manatee counties alone.

Nearly 100 manatee deaths in counties where red tide occurred have also been connected to the blooms. Impacts to other fish like tarpon — less high-profile species with fewer protections — won’t be known until future stock assessments can be performed, NOAA spokeswoman Kim Amendola said in an email.



The image above is the top layer in a series of maps for 08-13-18 to 08-16-18 displaying the highest level of potential respiratory irritation forecasts in each region.

Source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

While debate swirls over how much the polluted lake water has exacerbated an expanse of red tide that now extends along the coast, Huff is certain of one thing:

“This isn’t something new,” he said. “It’s just gotten steadily worse.”

The state is now scrambling to deal with a tide that scientists said this week shows no sign of easing. On Monday, Gov. Rick Scott declared a state of emergency for areas hit by the red tide, a month after he declared a similar emergency for communities slimed by blue-green algae, providing money for cleanup, boosting tourism and research. But residents like Huff and White wonder why it’s taken a red tide as devastating as this year’s for the state to pay attention to their water quality.

Over the last decade, monitoring that could have helped predict the lake’s freshwater algae blooms or better understand how coastal pollution influences saltwater red tides has been cut.

White believes it’s wrong to place all the blame on sugar farmers south of the lake when much of the pollution now flowing into the lake comes from the north, home to cattle ranches and citrus groves and where urban runoff from sprawling suburbs gets funneled into the watershed.

“I have written in more than one novel that Florida gains nothing from Big Sugar except for some misguided politicians,” he said. “But to blame Big Sugar for this combination of unfortunate phenomena, I think it’s misguided and that worries me because I think the problem is larger than that.”



A sheephead, suspected of dying from red tide poisoning, lies off the bayside beach in Sanibel. The heavy fish kills that inundated the island subsided by the end of last week.

Scientists would agree. How much lake releases inflame or extend red tides or how nutrients from dying blue-green algae or dying fish feed tides is unclear. There have been years with heavy lake releases and no red tides. And vice versa. Getting answers, however, has been hindered by a dearth of funding for consistent research.

“It’s not as if we haven’t been proposing it over and over and over again,” said University of South Florida physical oceanography professor Bob Weisberg, who issues annual red tide forecasts. “But we just can’t get the agencies to buy in.”

To say water is a way of life in Southwest Florida is an understatement.

“It’s a necessity,” White said. “Not just economically, but visually, aesthetically. It is part of what we are.”

Friends who still guide tell him this tide is the worst they’ve ever seen, dampening spirits and squeezing wallets. And it’s not just guides taking a hit. White, who co-owns three restaurants, said business is down 20 percent. The Sanibel Sea School lost \$25,000 from cancellations, said co-founder and director Bruce Neill.

“That’s nearly a salary for one of our people. It’s not 100 percent, but nearly,” he said.



Dead fish float in a creek in Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge in Sanibel on Friday. – Red Tide from Miami Herald

Huff, who grew up in Marathon, usually believes less government is better than more. His wife grew up in Clewiston, Florida’s sweetest town and headquarters for U.S. Sugar, where her dad was the high school principal. Huff was an electrical engineer who owned his own business until a year and a half ago when he decided to do what he’d wanted to do his whole life: be a fishing guide.

Even before the red tide, it bothered him that he had to commute more than an hour to the Everglades to find clean water and enough fish to make a living.

When he first started fishing in the area, a meadow of turtle grass covered a flat where the mouth of the Caloosahatchee dumps into San Carlos Bay. Huff and his brother would regularly scour the flat in search of redfish and snook. The flat also held pinfish, shellfish and oysters, all important links in the marine food chain.

“Now it’s like the surface of the moon out there,” he said. “It’s night and day from when I moved here.”

What angers him, and people like White and Neill, is the state’s tepid response despite repeated hits to the coasts — in 2016 a toxic blue-green algae bloom fouled the St. Lucie estuary and crippled businesses. The ongoing \$16 billion Everglades restoration is supposed to send more water south, but last year lawmakers trimmed plans for a 60,000-acre reservoir to 17,000 acres. In 2016, they voted to extend a deadline for cleaning up the lake by another 20 years. Back in 2012, Gov. Scott repealed a law requiring regular septic tank inspections.

“We understand this,” Neill said. “This is plumbing.”

As a former engineer, Huff believes finding a solution based on science is doable. But he worries time is running out. His father, Capt. Steve Huff, began guiding in the Ten Thousands Islands in the 1980s, and his brother, Capt. Dustin Huff, guides in the Keys. He’s not so certain his own 13-year-old son will have a future in the family business.

“We all have a vested interest one way or another in this argument,” he said. “But we need a definite answer because it shouldn’t be an argument.”



Capt. Chad Huff found a 'trophy fish,' an 80- to 100-pound tarpon, floating dead last week near Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge in Sanibel, where some of the worst fish kills have occurred since a red tide appeared off Southwest Florida in October.