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COMMENTARY

It's a sin what we've done to Florida's seagrass

'We're pulling tons of floating seagrass out of the water. I mean tons.'



CRAIG PITTMAN

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📷 Eric Sutton, director of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, views seagrass killed during the red tide bloom. Credit: FWC

The news reports around where I live in St. Petersburg have been greatly concerned with weights and measures recently. It's an effort to quantify the horror of the ongoing red tide algae bloom by recounting the staggering amount of the sea life that has turned up dead: **500 tons! Three million pounds! 1,711 tons!** And so on.

After seeing enough of these reports, my curiosity got the better of me, so I called the person I call every time there's a red tide bloom off the coast of Pinellas County, Kelli Hammer Levy.

As director of the county's public works department,

she's in charge of the response to the stinky crisis. All through a 2018 bloom, she projected an air of calm competence, a reassuring attitude when facing a tsunami of dead fish and fleeing tourists.

At my request, she listed some of the species of marine life that her cleanup crews had found dead. They'd seen quite a lot – massive goliath grouper, for instance, and sea robins, a bottom-dweller with pectoral fins that resemble wings.

Then she mentioned seagrass, and I said, “Wait, what?”

“We're pulling tons of floating seagrass out of the water,” Levy told me. “I mean *tons*. It's very disappointing.”

The red tide algae bloom has been lingering along the state's Gulf Coast since December, but it hit the Tampa Bay area during the seagrass' growing season, she explained. The grasses the crews have been pulling out of the water look fine, other than being dead.

You know how people say, “I've got good news and I've got bad news”? Well, this is like that except the good news is bad too. We need healthy seagrass – the kind that's still alive, that is.

When I was a kid growing up in the Florida Panhandle, I didn't appreciate seagrass. In fact, I hated it.

Whenever I encountered a few tendrils of seagrass while splashing around at the beach, I always thought the stuff was creepy. It felt as if some seafaring ghost haunting

the Gulf of Mexico had stretched out thin green fingers to clutch at my legs. (I was not particularly bright as a child, but I had a vivid imagination.)



📷 Turtle grass (*Thalassia testudinum*), the largest of the Florida seagrasses, has deeper root structures than any of the other seagrasses. Credit: Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

Now, of course, I realize seagrass is not creepy at all. It's absolutely essential to the continued health of our Gulf, estuaries, and other waterways. It filters impurities, stabilizes the sandy bottom, and provides habitat for small fish, shrimp, and crabs. It also feeds manatees. (More on that in a minute.)

It's not like the green St. Augustine grass that covers your lawn and you have to mow every week or so – although the two do share a connection.

Despite what your homeowners' association says, we can live without green lawns. But Florida can't get by without our seagrass.

Florida has nearly 2.5 million acres of seagrass beds, more than any other state. The seagrass in Florida Bay down at the state's southern tip, and in the Big Bend area from Tarpon Springs north to Apalachee Bay, "are two of the most extensive seagrass beds in continental North America," according to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's [website](#).

But, right now, an awful lot of Florida's seagrass is being

mowed down (so to speak) by us humans.

“Since 2012, runoff fed algae blooms that harmed seagrass in the Panhandle, Big Bend, southwest Florida, and along the east coast from Biscayne Bay to the northern Indian River Lagoon,” [Florida Today reported](#) recently.

It's hard to say exactly how much has been lost, according to Brad Furman, the research scientist who oversees seagrass studies at the Florida Wildlife Research Institute, the state's marine science lab.

Furman told me the agency puts out a statewide study – the [Seagrass Integrated Mapping and Monitoring](#) report, or SIMM for short, which I initially misheard as “SIN.” He said the most recent SIN – er, I mean SIMM – report came out in 2016 – five years ago.

“We're still trying to secure funding to keep that going,” he said.

On second thought, maybe “SIN” is a good description of what's going on with that report – and with our treatment of seagrass in general.

Choose how you die

There's one place in Florida where we have a pretty good idea how much seagrass has been wiped out: the Indian River Lagoon.

As a barber once said about my balding head: It's easier to calculate a loss when it approaches 100 percent.

Once regarded as North America's most productive estuary, the Indian River Lagoon once had 79,000 acres of seagrass beds that helped it achieve that reputation. Over the last 10 years, it's lost 95 percent, according to Patrick Rose, executive director of the Save the Manatee Club.



📷 Manatees. Credit: Visit Florida.

Bear in mind that an adult manatee needs to chow down on 100 to 200 pounds of seagrass every day to keep on swimming and splashing and doing those barrel rolls every tourist loves.

This past winter, when manatees huddled in the shallow lagoon for warmth, they couldn't locate enough seagrass nearby to eat, Rose explained. To find food they had to travel outside the area that kept them warm.

"They literally had to choose between dying of cold stress or dying of starvation," Rose told me, his voice shaking.

As of July 23, [state wildlife commission records](#) show Florida has lost at least 881 of its manatees this year, well beyond the previous record of 830 set in 2003. And we've got nearly five more months to go.

Many manatees died of malnutrition because they had no seagrass to eat. The way things are going, Rose said, he fears next winter will bring a repeat of the 2020-21

mass die-off.

And what caused this cascade of catastrophes? “We’re dealing with an excess of nutrient loading,” Rose said, blaming leaking septic tanks and sewer lines, as well as clueless homeowners putting too much fertilizer on their lawns. (Ah, there’s the St. Augustine grass connection.).

The nutrients (which also flow from farmers’ fields) fueled algae blooms that were deadly for the seagrass – shading them out so they could get no sun, among other attacks. Rose warned that the way things are going in the lagoon, it may have reached a tipping point where most of the seagrass has disappeared forever, supplanted by algae ad infinitum.

My next call was to Leesa Souto, executive director of the Marine Resources Council in Palm Bay, an environmental group trying to restore the fish and wildlife resources of the lagoon.

When I asked what could fix the lagoon after such a dramatic loss, she gave me a two-word answer: “Clean water.”

The only way to make the seagrass come back, she contended, is to vanquish the poor water quality that killed it in the first place.

The fact that the lagoon’s seagrass died in such large quantities is a sign of what a poor job state officials have done at keeping the lagoon clean, she contended. The

DEP and water management districts set “Total Maximum Daily Load” totals – TMDLs for short – for the amount of pollution allowed to flow into the lagoon. Then the state issues permits to polluters based on the TMDL numbers, regardless of what’s going on with the seagrass.

“That’s all they care about,” she said. “I don’t know what they think they’re doing with those TMDLs. Those TMDLs are not going to do enough to protect the habitat of the manatees.”

She’d like to see the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service join forces to push for a full lagoon cleanup, all in the name of saving those dying manatees.

So far, though, the odds of that happening are roughly the same as the odds that Disney World will sic an exterminator on that big rat running around the Magic Kingdom.

Say amen to Rev. Cleanwaters

Gov. Ron DeSantis stopped off in Sarasota on Tuesday to cut a ribbon and brag a little, two things at which he excels.

The [ribbon-cutting](#) was for the Florida Red Tide Mitigation and Technology Development Facility at Mote Marine Laboratory. The bragging was about how much taxpayer money he’s spent on toxic algae blooms even as they continue blooming. This is like bragging

about how you've kept businesses open during a pandemic while standing in an ICU jammed with wheezing patients.

DeSantis' default setting in a crisis is to channel Chip Diller from "Animal House" shouting, "All is well!" So if you were expecting him to be weeping and wailing over the loss of marine life and seagrasses you were no doubt disappointed.

Instead, he was touting technology as the answer, announcing that the new Mote facility will "hopefully lead to new technologies that prevent and mitigate harmful blooms."

He made no mention of the [Piney Point disaster](#) – even though the pollution that flowed into Tampa Bay this spring from that abandoned fertilizer plant no doubt fueled the intensity of the red tide bloom.



📷 Development and climate change make the environment a sensitive issue in Florida, seen here from space at night. Photo by NASA Earth Observatory

And he didn't bring up climate change, which as it heats up the water stimulates growth of toxic algae blooms.

You may recall that last year DeSantis signed into law the [Clean Waterways Act](#), which sounds good but does so little to produce clean waterways that it should be renamed the "Window Dressing Act." He has made no further move toward using the

state's regulatory power to push polluters to stop fouling the public's rivers, streams, and bays, despite the harm to the tourism and fishing industries.

The problem with relying on technology to save the day is that it's not much use in dealing with seagrass.

I checked with Peter Clark at Tampa Bay Watch, an organization that has spent years planting new seagrass in Tampa Bay. He verified my suspicion that the most successful way to plant seagrass is still to do it by hand. You will not be surprised to hear that that method takes a loooooooooooooong time.

DeSantis' tech talk reminded me of the way, in the early 2000s, some Florida officials got excited about the potential of a technological approach to seagrass planting. A Ruskin sod farmer had invented a [mechanical planter](#), a paddlewheel boat that put out a lot of seagrass plugs at once, speeding up the process. The state gave him tens of thousands of dollars in grant money to test it.

But the machine glitched. Sometimes it dropped the seagrass onto the bay bottom upside down. Or the grass would fall in areas where the current would blow it all away. Most of his plantings failed to take root.

"It never really worked," Clark told me. Ultimately, he said, the best way to encourage the growth of seagrass is to persuade people to stop dumping pollution in the water.

Instead of spending millions on technology while letting polluters off the hook, I say Florida should copy the approach of the evangelists you see on TV attacking evil.

We'll buy some airtime, say right after the lottery drawings, and recruit a gospel choir to proclaim the virtues of healthy seagrass ("Shall We Gather at the River" seems ripe for adaptation).

Then we'll hire a high-haired actor to portray Rev. Cleanwaters, who will stand in the pulpit and condemn the evils of pollution and algae blooms. I can picture him now, pointing a finger at the viewers and thundering about all who ruin our Florida paradise.

Does this sound desperate? I guess so. But I figure we've got to do something drastic, because the more we sin against our seagrass, the closer we get to hell on earth.

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CRAIG PITTMAN



Craig Pittman is a native Floridian. In 30 years at the Tampa Bay Times, he won numerous state and national awards for his environmental reporting. He is the author of five books, including the New York Times bestseller *Oh, Florida! How America's Weirdest State Influences the Rest of the Country*, which won a gold medal from the Florida Book Awards. His latest, published in 2020, is *Cat Tale: The Wild, Weird Battle to Save the Florida Panther*. The Florida Heritage Book Festival recently named him a Florida Literary Legend. Craig is co-host of the "Welcome to Florida" podcast. He lives in St. Petersburg with his wife and children.

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