

[https://www.hometownnewstc.com/news/vero-beach-scientist-warns-oslo-boat-ramp-lagoon-water-worst-he-s-seen/article\\_043b235c-d9d4-11eb-a52b-1f8degec17f1.html](https://www.hometownnewstc.com/news/vero-beach-scientist-warns-oslo-boat-ramp-lagoon-water-worst-he-s-seen/article_043b235c-d9d4-11eb-a52b-1f8degec17f1.html)

FEATURED

## Vero Beach scientist warns Oslo boat ramp lagoon water worst he's seen

By Mike Winikoff  
Jul 1, 2021



Pelican Island Audubon Society President Dr. Richard Baker warns that an abundance of bacteria at the Oslo boat ramp is the worst he has ever seen.

Photo courtesy of Richard Baker

VERO BEACH — Water quality in the Indian River Lagoon has been a regular topic of discussion for decades. But one prominent local scientist says the water at the Oslo boat ramp is now the worst he has seen in 40 years, since at least 1982.

According to Pelican Island Audubon Society President Richard Baker, the current problems are caused by bacteria, specifically a Cyanobacteria called Lyngbya. Due to its appearance, most people call it blue-green algae, but Dr. Baker says it's actually a bacteria.

"It's normally found there," Dr. Baker told Hometown News. "It occurs naturally in the lagoon, but when you get high levels of nitrogen and phosphorous, it expands and becomes a problem."

One big problem is the smell, which Dr. Baker described as offensive.



Pelican Island Audubon Society relocated summer camp kayaking away from the Oslo boat ramp due to hazardous Cyanobacteria.

Photo courtesy of Richard Baker

"When I take people down there, the first thing they say is it smells so terrible. It's a sickening smell, especially where people put in kayaks to the north side of the ramp. And the black muck is more than I anticipated."

A second problem is the potential for health problems caused by direct exposure. As a result, Dr. Baker has temporarily cancelled kayak outings at the Oslo boat ramp for children attending the Pelican Island Audubon Society summer camp. They have been going to Round Island instead.



Scientists say manatees like this one in the Sebastian River are starving due to the lack of seagrass, leaving them to reach out of the water for food.

Photo courtesy of Richard Baker

"It's too ugly down there, and where the kids are walking to get into their kayaks they'd walk through the stuff," Dr. Baker said. "You can get itchy rashes, irritation, and redness from it on your skin. And apparently it can cause some respiratory issues too."

Perhaps the worst result from the bacteria is its effect on the health of manatees. Dr. Baker says the bacteria is preventing the growth of seagrasses, which manatees need to survive.

"Our manatees are dying, 700 since Jan. 1, mostly from starvation. We need to somehow protect the manatees."

Dr. Baker suspects that one of the main causes, much like the different bacteria species causing problems in Lake Okeechobee, is the overuse of fertilizer on lawns.

"I think it's coming from fertilizer, septic tanks, and broken sewage pipes. Those are the three big things."

"It's killing the seagrasses. With all the stuff on top of the surface, the seagrasses are not getting sunlight to grow. All this stuff, like fertilizer, is causing this bacteria and maybe other algae-type plants, that are inhibiting our seagrasses."

"The Oslo boat ramp used to have one of the best seagrasses in the lagoon. It was getting flushed pretty nicely from the Ft. Pierce inlet up to the 17th St. Bridge. But it's hard to find seagrasses out there now. The manatees are vegetarians and need plants to survive."

To address the problem, Dr. Baker says that everyone in the county should reduce the size of their lawns, and replace the turf with native plants and trees. He raved about Alachua County as a government model.

"Alachua County has a program I'm pretty impressed with where they give money to people to remove grass from their lawns. They got a grant from the water management district for a program they call Turf Swap. They find that it's cheaper to pay people to get rid of their grass than to have to find more water for that. About 64% of our drinking water goes to irrigate lawns in Florida, and that goes up to 80% during the summer."

"We need to get our legislators in the cities, county, and state to reduce all this turf we have, reduce it down to 15-20% grass. All the rest should be native plants and trees."

Another example set by Alachua County that Dr. Baker says we should follow is increasing the local fertilizer ban to eight months.

"Here we have four months of no fertilizer, June 1-Sept. 30. In Alachua, they extend that to eight months. We also need to enforce this ban on fertilizing during this period. There's really no enforcement. And we need to stop the sale of fertilizer during those months. It should not be on the shelves."

According to Dr. Baker, virtually no Florida lawns ever need phosphorous. He wishes that governments at all levels, from the cities to the state, would ban the use of phosphorous in fertilizer absent a soil sample test showing a rare phosphorous deficit.

"Florida exports phosphorous. The University of Florida and others have said that we don't need to put any phosphorous on our lawn. If you think you do, you can take a soil sample and send it to the extension office and they will analyze it to see if you really do need phosphorous. But most people's yards have plenty of phosphorous. We should ban or restrict all fertilizers with phosphorous, and have available more non-phosphorous fertilizer."

One approach, Dr. Baker said, would be to only allow people to buy fertilizer with phosphorous if they've had a soil sample saying that they need phosphorous.

Throughout our conversation, Dr. Baker brought the situation back to the beloved manatees.

"There's too much grass on land and not enough in the lagoon. Manatees are starving because they don't have seagrass, and the reason is because we have too much grass on land that we're fertilizing. That fertilizer is killing the seagrass, which is killing the manatees. It's a direct connection."

Even if you live miles from the lagoon, Dr. Baker says that switching a portion of your yard from lawn to native plants would positively affect the quality of water around the Oslo boat ramp and throughout the lagoon.

Pelican Island Audubon Society is on a mission to plant 100,000 native trees and plants over the next 15 years. So far they have distributed over 8,000 native trees and plants in the last two years. They sell about 40 different species very cheaply, and give away free southern oak trees, which Dr. Baker calls "the best tree for birds and butterflies."

For more information, advice, or to purchase native plants or obtain free oak trees, contact PIAS at (772) 567-3520, or visit [www.pelicanislandaudubon.org](http://www.pelicanislandaudubon.org).

---

**Mike Winikoff**  
Indian River County Reporter  
Writer