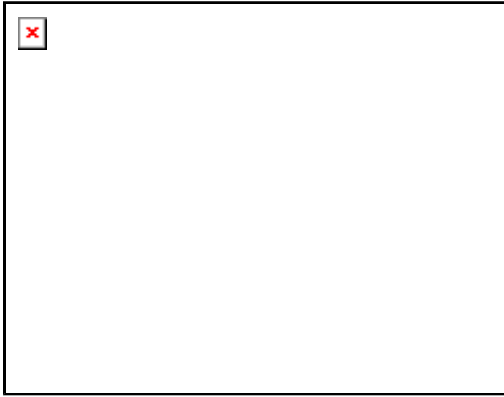


National Seashore researchers take a look at a yucky seaweed problem

By ERIC WILLIAMS
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WELLFLEET - A lone man stands at the ocean's edge, putting seaweed into a plastic bag. Is he hungry or just plain crazy?

He's a biology student, the front line of a new Cape Cod National Seashore study of mung, the brown algae that fouls Outer Cape beaches this time of year.



■ Patrick Lyons displays a sample of mung freshly pulled from the water at Newcomb Hollow Beach in Wellfleet. The stinky, slimy brown algae washes up on the Outer Cape's beaches this time of year. Below, a handful of the weed.

(Staff photo by Steve Heaslip)

Patrick Lyons, perhaps soon to be known as "Mr. Mung," stalks the not-so-elusive algae at 40 spots along the great Outer Beach, from Provincetown to Eastham.

"In a lot of areas, I'm the only guy out there," said Lyons, 21, an undergraduate at the University of Rhode Island. "Just me and the nude bathers."

What is this thing called mung? Scientists believe it is mostly composed of the brown algae *Pilayella littoralis*, though there may be other algae species in the mix.

Swimmers know it when they see it: a giant stinky brown sea-toupee splattered over the sand and the water near the shore.

And there are the telltale long faces at the beach. Perhaps only spilt ice cream produces a more potent frown than that rotten moment when a beachgoer pokes his head over the edge of the parking lot and sees the slippery brown blight.

But don't hate algae, try to understand it, says Carol Thornber, an algal ecologist at the University of Rhode Island who is working with the Seashore on the mung study.

"Algae are at the bottom of the food chain, so anytime you're eating fish or lobster, anything that comes from the ocean - if you go back in the chain far enough, you started with some type of algae."

This is her mission: "Telling people that algae are important. You don't want to just kill them all off."

The Seashore study hopes to first figure out where, when and how much mung shows up.

Seashore ecologist John Portnoy, a longtime Outer Cape resident, said anecdotal evidence from

a somewhat reliable source - old surfers - indicates there may be more mung in more places than there used to be.

"It seems like the majority of them say it's gotten a lot worse," Portnoy said. "They think that the really dense mung that we see in Wellfleet has grown in recent decades."

Head of the Meadow Beach in North Truro is usually the epicenter of the mung invasion, which usually starts about this time each year, Portnoy said.

This past weekend, Portnoy observed mung at Newcomb Hollow, a Wellfleet town beach.

"By Sunday, kids were throwing it at their fathers," he said.

Yesterday, Newcomb Hollow Beach appeared relatively mung-free to the casual observer, but not to the seaweed-eyed Patrick Lyons. Like a long-legged bird, he swooped and snatched specimens for later analysis. His mung prediction?

"More. Likely soon," Lyons said.

Once baseline data is gathered about mung's seasonal cycle, scientists will attempt to explain what drives the annual bloom. Human-caused nitrogen loading seems an unlikely explanation, given the relative remoteness of the Outer Cape, but warming ocean temperatures could possibly play a role.

One thing's for certain: Even science won't stop the merciless mung.

"We're not expecting that this study will cure the problem," Portnoy said.

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