

Florida Bay Seagrasses Are Dying Off

Seagrasses in western Florida Bay, the base of the complex food web that extends to shrimp, game fish, and wading birds, are rapidly dying. No one yet knows why.

About 30 percent of the western part of the Bay, 56,000 acres, may be on the sick list, according to Dr. Michael Robblee, Marine Ecologist with Everglades NP. Florida Bay is within the park's boundaries. Mike

Finley, park superintendent, feels this situation is significant and that it is necessary to determine whether it is naturally caused or induced by water management. Dr. Robblee reported on Nov. 15, 1988, the fall emergency field sampling of the seagrass die-off had just been completed. Four groups of researchers looked at the situation, including Dr. Ron Jones of Florida International University, Dr. David Porter of the University of Georgia, Dr. Joseph Zieman of the University of Virginia, and Drs. Michael Durako and Paul Carson of the Florida Institute of Marine Research. Those who had seen the die-off were struck by how much it had changed. Die-off now is present in three new basins and has spread tremendously in those basins previously known to be impacted. Recovery in older die-off patches has occurred.

Dr. David Porter and his graduate student, Lisa Muehlstein, felt that they were seeing disease in association with die-off in the Bay, although whether it is the cause of the die-off or a secondary effect resulting because of other stresses remains unknown. They took numerous samples back with them to analyze. Dr. Zieman visited the lower keys where he has done a great deal of work over the past decade and confirmed that die-off was present in Big Pine Channel. This is the first reported die-off outside the park. Dr. Brian Lapointe mentioned that he has taken pictures of mass movement of floating seagrass leaving Florida Bay past the Seven Mile bridge. All of these observations indicate that die-off is continuing.