

Before reading my comments, it would be a good idea to check out the article to which it refers, which was written by David Sikes, outdoor writer for the Corpus Christi Caller Times. To do so, copy and paste the link below in your browser...

www.caller.com/news/2012/nov/28/why-are-baffin-bays-drum-starving-to-death/?partner=popular

I find several things interesting and troubling about the comments made by Sikes in the article. Obviously, I find it disturbing to learn that fish are starving to death in the home waters where I make a living as a fishing guide, even if they aren't the species I target. If one species is in trouble, what does that suggest about the futures of others? As Sikes rightly points out, it's impossible to say exactly what is causing the drum in Baffin Bay to starve, but he does offer a couple of plausible explanations, while making a few other, less-plausible statements.

Perhaps the problem is related to "declining food sources". Anglers and TP&W have documented a decline in some bottom feeders on the floor of Baffin (and all Texas bays) over recent decades. Some of these organisms, like dwarf surf clams and blue crabs, provide sustenance to Baffin's drum. With less of these crustaceans available, the food chain may have gotten out of balance. Apparently, Baffin's drum reproduce on a different schedule than members of the species living elsewhere, their shorter spawning cycle perhaps evolving as a response to hypersaline conditions in the area. If so, the area's drum may be more susceptible to short term "population correction" events.

Sikes sites several scientists and others who comment on various aspects of the situation. One says brown tide might have contributed to the problem by "altering the food chain". He also says the decline of specific kinds of creatures in the system is more likely due to "lower oxygen levels", which he says probably primarily result from higher water temperatures. I'd say brown tide could be contributing to the lower oxygen levels, since it prevents light penetration into the water and consequently has a negative effect on sea grass.

It's good to learn someone is studying how deteriorating water quality in these waters might be affecting the organisms which populate it. And to think they are doing this through valid scientific methods. Far too many fishing guides "run off at the mouth" about things related to water quality and fish behavior without doing any scientific analysis.

A local fishing guide (who I won't name, but whose name appears in the piece) asserts the recent brown tide bloom may be "contributing to an even greater problem", though the problem is not specifically identified. Mostly, brown tide makes it harder to catch fish! Clear evidence of any other detrimental effects on the system are harder to specify. I believe most

people fail to acknowledge how long brown tide blooms have been occurring in Baffin Bay, and have misidentified the causes of the blooms. Historical documents mention the existence of "bad water" in this closed estuary for many decades. It's likely that brown tide blooms are not a recent phenomenon in the Baffin Bay system. The only real study I can find on the algae suggests its proliferation in this area is primarily the result of hypersalinity, which is harmful to the organisms which "graze" on the algae.

When the salinity gets too high, the grazers die off and the algae goes unchecked. If a prolonged drought is followed by a fish-killing freeze (as occurred in the late 80s) the algae will have a perfect environment in which to flourish. Rotting fish give off ammonia, which is toxic to almost all organisms, including brown tide grazers, but not to brown algae.

Sikes says he "won't speculate" on the causes of brown tide, but then he does just that, saying "nutrient levels in Baffin have increased over the past decade. Speculative fingers of anglers point to a boost in agriculture operations on the King Ranch." He also rightly points out that scientists dispute the claim of a connection between ag runoff and brown tide blooms.

I fail to see how agricultural runoff could be a significant factor in this recent outbreak of brown tide, which I became aware of in the front portions of Baffin back in February. A historically severe drought preceded the onset, precluding the possibility of any significant amount of tainted freshwater flowing into the Baffin Bay system. Furthermore, agricultural runoff into this system overall is bound to be less than in systems on the Upper Coast, where brown tide is unknown.

The two factors which distinguish the Baffin Bay system from others where brown tide is not documented are higher salinity and higher average water temperature. Lower oxygen levels are probably more common too. These factors are likely combining to give brown algae a stronghold, not the introduction of nutrients into the system through the accidental actions of man.

Brown tide isn't making it impossible for drum to survive, something else is. Sikes says TP&W have known for years that black drum spawn at a young age in the areas where they are now starving. Gill net and creel surveys have shown a steady increase in populations of this fish over recent years. Armed with this knowledge, TP&W did nothing proactive to help bring those population levels back to normal.

Perhaps the agency should have started a campaign to encourage greater recreational harvest of black drum, by telling people they are easy to catch and good to eat. Additionally, the limit on the fish could have been raised in the area to promote greater harvest. It astounds me to learn we have a population of fish which are so numerous they are starving to death, and which are not the object of the general fishing public's obsession, yet the limit on them is 5 per day, while the limit on trout is 10. The most important thing I take away from all

this is a nagging, discomfoting sense that TP&W can not or will not manage the fishery in an optimal, ethical and responsible manner.

I do agree with Sikes on another of his main points. This problem is likely to "get worse before it gets better".