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Tidings

The Newsletter of the Friends of Perdido Bay

August 2015

Volume 28 Number 4

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www.friendsofperdidobay.com

SOME GOOD NEWS

One of our members asked for some good news. Here it is! We are still here! Some other good news is, the bay has looked better this summer. There hasn't been as much foam or dark water where we live. Perhaps that is because we have not had a lot of rain, or heavy rains. When we have a lot of rain, stuff washes out of the IP wetlands and into the bay. Just what has happened to the foam is not known. Maybe it has gone over to Escambia Bay. As I was flying into Pensacola at the end of May, the airplane came in over Escambia Bay. There was plenty of foam there. There is even a little more life in the bay - some young clams started appearing in the sand and some snails showed up on the walls. However we have a long way to go. We don't see grass beds, or flounder, crabs or shrimp. My neighbor put out his crab trap briefly this summer. He caught one blue crab and it was black instead of blue. Not a good sign. This is in the upper bay.

The bay still appears pretty turbid at times and bacteria counts are still high. These last two weeks coliform type bacteria measured about 13,000/ 100 ml of water. These bacteria live on the carbon type material which comes off of IP's wetland. It is very important not to swim in Perdido Bay if you have a cut.

How about the bay where you live? We have included a questionnaire with this newsletter. If you wish, please fill it out and send it back to us. You don't have to tell us your name, just where you live on the bay. We would like to hear from you and get your feedback.

FAMILY VALUES

From time to time, I think it is really important to remember what Perdido Bay was and what we have lost. It was a bay that was so important in so many families' lives. It should be that again. So my sister-in-law wrote a piece on what Perdido Bay was like and what it meant to them in the 1950's.

Perdido Bay in the 50's

In the early 1950's our house and most others had no air conditioning. We stayed cool by spending as much time as possible swimming and playing in Perdido Bay. In the morning we hurried through our chores as quickly as possible and then donned our swim suits and headed for the bay. From the stack of black inner tubes piled near the bath house, we picked our favorites, pumped a little more air into them and ran down to the water. While floating on the inner tubes, splashing each other in water battles, or diving underneath the gentle waves to sneak up and tip each other out of the tubes, minutes and hours passed quickly. Our toes could feel the clams tucked into the sandy bottom and we hauled them up in great quantities to practice skipping them across the water. Once the adults joined us, we waded out deeper to the floating platform anchored in chest-deep water. Front dives, back dives, flips, and cannonball jumps, we did them all until our skin was as wrinkled as raisins and our stomachs, rumbling from hunger, drove us back to shore and lunch. My older brother, who loved fishing, would often get his speargun, flippers, and mask to snorkel around the cypress stumps, stalking the fish that hid amongst the shadowy roots. Other days he woke at dawn and took his small motor boat out to the bayou or creek to try his luck with rod and reel. The water was clear and the shallows were full of schools of minnows which we younger children would catch using an old dishtowel lowered into the water. Sitting as still as possible, we waited for some minnows to swim across the towel and then raised it quickly, trapping a few of the silvery fish. Later in the afternoon we would swim again, never tiring of watching mullet jumping, skipping clams, water skiing, or digging on the sandy beach and creating elaborate sand castles. On a weekend the whole family would load up the big boat with the charcoal grill and a cooler full of ingredients to motor across the bay to a sandy beach on the other side. Once there my father would cook bacon, eggs and sausage for breakfast while we explored for driftwood or swam.

In the evening, after dinner we would sit on the screened porch, playing cards, doing jigsaw puzzles, or reading books and listening to the night sounds. Sometimes we would hear the putt-putt of a small outboard motor or see the light and hear the voices of fishermen that were going flounder fishing. Often we would go to the water's edge to watch and follow along from the shore.

Those were good times and the bay was at its best, with plenty of fish, crabs, bird life. Foam didn't wash up on the beaches, silt didn't coat your skin after swimming, and the sandy bottom was firm and clean.

SOME NOT SO GOOD NEWS

Last Fall, Friends of Perdido Bay tested for dioxin in the sediments of Tee Lake. This lake is a small tidal lake in the Northern end of Perdido Bay. It is also the lake into which approximately 75% of IP's discharges flow before reaching the upper end of the bay. Dioxin, especially 2,3,7,8 TCDD, is a toxic chemical which had been associated with bleached paper mills. We had not sampled the sediments of Perdido Bay since 2004 when 2,3,7,8 TCDD was found in fairly high concentrations. (See our website for the dioxin values). We reported these high concentrations to the EPA and the DEP in 2004 but they said that this material was from past dumping, and wasn't new. Nothing was done.

So last Fall we decided to test for dioxin again. 2,3,7,8 TCDD dioxin should not be there since the paper mill has gone to making mostly brown paper. They still do a little bleaching. Dioxin of the 2,3,7,8 TCDD variety was found in fairly low levels - 0.445 parts per trillion. However other forms of dioxins, especially OCDD, were discovered in relatively high amounts -1470 ppt. The class of chemicals called furans tended to be slightly high. These types of dioxins are associated with combustion products. If you converted all the other forms of dioxin to the same toxicity as the most toxic form 2,3,7,8 TCDD, the toxic value would be 7.01 ppt.

We also tested for PCB's in the sediment from Tee Lake, as well. And yes, there were PCB's. Three PCB's were high - PCB 105, PCB118, PCB 156/157. These were the same PCB's which were high in 2004 sediments in Perdido Bay. These are also the same PCB's which are high in Escambia Bay. Escambia Bay has very elevated PCB's which have been blamed on a spill of PCB's by Monsanto back in the 1960's. Perdido Bay has not had a spill of PCB's as far as I know.

In a previous newsletter, I attributed these dioxins and PCB's to ash from IP boilers. I have a different theory now, however. As I was reading through the new rules which EPA put in place for the paper industry in the late 1990's, I came across the new rules for capturing pollution in air. New air scrubbers were required for smoke stacks on power boilers. These air scrubbers use sodium hydroxide to remove pollutants from the air. Sodium hydroxide plus captured air pollutants are discharged into the wastewater treatment system, which empties into Perdido Bay. This is where the dioxins, PCB's and even a lot of the heavy metals found in Perdido Bay come from. To me, this is pretty horrible. I also understand why people back in the late 1990's told me, the paper mill was taking the pollution out of the air and putting it back in the water. That is correct.

The fuel which IP uses to power their power boilers, coal mixed with ground-up wood products, is the source of the PCB's and dioxins in Perdido Bay. Certainly natural gas is a much cleaner burning fuel and would not have the contaminants of coal or wood.

Perhaps President Obama's new push for stricter air pollution standards will help, not only clean up our air, but our water as well. It is going to be a tough fight.

And yes, our environment agencies are well aware of the situation. No, I am not going to bother with the problem on Escambia Bay.

JUST LIKE A SWIMMING POOL

When Dr. Livingston was working for the paper mill. He, of course, never publically pointed the finger at his employer. However in some of his reports, he said some pretty incriminating stuff. In his August 2000, report on Perdido Bay, he wrote this.

"Perdido Bay in the NE Gulf of Mexico is somewhat unique in that it is a relatively small system with only one primary source of pollution in the upper bay, a pulp mill. Pulp mill effluents tend to have relatively high concentrations of nutrients. Although there is some agricultural runoff into the Perdido River, such activity is concentrated principally to the west and south of the upper bay. Most of the land in the upper Perdido drainage basin is lightly populated. The highest agriculture and urban runoff is thus located in the lower bay. This combination of factors establishes upper Perdido Bay as an excellent place to carry out research concerning nutrient loading and eutrophication since the upper bay is small, and relatively free of pollutants other than a single source of nutrients"

How easy it would be to control algal growth and other things in the upper bay by just dumping in an herbicide. You could still discharge a lot of nutrients, but you would not have the problem of algae blooms. This is what, I believe, is happening. It looks fine from a distance. But it isn't.

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