

Water quality key to tourism

By **Jason Schaffer** - January 10, 2022



Dave Tomasko, executive director of the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program addresses the Manatee County Tourist Development Council at their December meeting. Jason Schaffer | Sun

ANNA MARIA – While Sarasota Bay is healthier than it was in the 1970s and 1980s, it's not as healthy as it was 15 years ago.

That little-known fact is a serious concern to Dave Tomasko, executive director of the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program.

"We are the only estuary program whose number one goal is to protect water clarity," Tomasko said during the December meeting on the Island of the Manatee County Tourist Development Council. "People want to throw out the anchor on their boat, jump in the water and see their feet."

Tomasko said there are three main reasons to worry about water quality in Sarasota Bay. One of them is quality of life, since people don't like spending their time in murky water or covered in algae. Both locals and tourists choose this area because of optimal swimming and boating conditions. Tomasko stressed how much the quality of the water has to do with our economy.

"People pay a premium to live here," Tomasko said. "If you want to have cheap waterfront communities, go to Merritt Island. You'll pay a lot less per square

foot than you will here or on Siesta Key or Longboat Key. The water is not good there.”

There are 20,000 jobs associated with the bay, he said, including not just the fishing industry, but service industry people like bartenders and servers, bayfront businesses and their owners and staff. The list goes on, he added, saying that water quality is a major factor in keeping these people employed.

“The final thing is Florida’s wildlife heritage. This is the worst year on record for manatee deaths in the state of Florida,” said Tomasko. “Over a thousand dead, and halfway through this year we were already in the worst year. The previous worst year was a red tide year in 2013.”

According to data gathered by Tomasko and the program, the reason for the manatee deaths is very simple; they’re starving to death. Decreased water quality has caused the seagrass meadows, which are the primary food source for manatees, to die off by at least 60% in the Indian River Lagoon. To help save the starving manatees, for the first time ever, the Estuary Program is going to pay people to feed them romaine lettuce. While Sarasota Bay has not reached that level, it has lost 22% of its seagrass and could be headed in that direction sooner than later.

The Piney Point wastewater spill last spring was cited as a major concern and may be doing more damage than just the red tide outbreak in 2021, he said, and the ripple effect could cause problems that the bay has yet to see.

Related coverage

[Florida loses record number of manatees in 2021](#)

Jason Schaffer

Sun correspondent Jason Schaffer covers tourism, the arts, Anna Maria Elementary School, the Anna Maria Island Chamber of Commerce and Cortez. [Email](#)