

Marine Events Reporting System Collects Observations of Events at Sea

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You can be the eyes and ears of the scientists studying the marine life of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

MEERA, the Marine Ecosystem Event Response and Assessment program, seeks information about unusual events affecting marine life in waters of the Florida Keys. If you see a fish kill or an event that adversely affects marine life, you are encouraged to complete an observer report form online to create a record of the observation.

“Mote scientists use the observer reports to determine if there might be a large scale event occurring and if a response team is needed to assess the situation. Ecosystem managers and scientists use the reports to help determine whether the events are natural or linked to human activities,” commented MEERA Project Coordinator Cory Walter, Mote’s Tropical Research Laboratory, Summerland Key.



The crew from Sunset Watercraft of Key West rescued a stranded manta ray aboard one of their small boats and released it in deeper waters. The manta was doused in seawater frequently during the short trip to deeper water. (Photo: Sunset Watercraft)

This past winter, observers reported several events to MEERA. Evan Haskell of Sunset Watercraft in Key West described the rescue of a large manta ray that was caught up on a shoal, unable to get to deeper water on its own. The Sunset Watercraft crew was concerned about the ray, so they sent one of their small boats to rescue the struggling animal and carry it out to deeper water, where “she took off like a bullet,” according to owner/operator Carlo Gigli.

In December, a micro-algal bloom known as red tide was reported off Cape Sable at the southern tip of the Florida peninsula. This bloom was associated with discolored water and numerous fish kills. After examining the water samples collected by Captain Gary Nichols of Conch Key and Captain Bruce Irwin of Marathon, Mote scientists determined that the concentration of the bloom organism, *Karenia brevis*, was high enough to cause human respiratory irritation and probably fish kills. During the winter, the bloom moved slowly southward on the gulf side of the Keys, eventually dissipating in the vicinity of Key West.



A macro-algal bloom on the seafloor was reported this past spring in several locations. Samples of the algae are now being genetically identified to help determine the origin of the bloom. (Photo: Ken Nedimyer)

In late spring, Marine Life Collector Skip Wohlers reported a benthic algae bloom in Hawks Channel. This bloom is characterized by an overgrowth of algae growing attached to the bottom. A similar bloom was also reported in the vicinity of Pickles and Conch reefs by Sanctuary Advisory Council Vice-Chair Ken Nedimyer. Scientists are in the process of genetically identifying the algae to help determine the origin of the bloom.

Since the program began in 1997, five years of data have been collected and over 1,000 reports have been logged. MEERA was the brainchild of Mote’s Tropical Research Laboratory’s first director Dr. Erich Mueller and former Sanctuary Science Coordinator Ben Haskell.

For more information on MEERA, visit the website: <http://isurus.mote.org/Keys/research/MEERA.phtml> or contact the Program Coordinator, Cory Walter, Mote Marine Laboratory Tropical Research Laboratory at: cwalter@mote.org.

Note: This article appeared in the Summer 2005 issue of the newsletter of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, Sounding Line. For more information, visit: <http://floridakeys.noaa.gov>.