

Visiting diver suspects algae

COMMENTARY

By URSULA KEUPER-BENNETT

I am writing this letter for some friends of mine who can't take pen to flipper and fin.

For me this no longer matters. After spending 15 summers in Hawaii averaging five weeks a stay and two dives daily, this is my last time on Maui. Next summers will be spent in the Caribbean as Maui can no longer provide decent ocean for me anymore.

But I'm not leaving until I've had my say — my aquatic friends can't up and leave as easily as I can.

This summer, like two summers before (1989), there is alleged algae choking the waters off Honokowai. I say "alleged" because no one admits to it being here.

Each morning the topic of conversation at the condo we rent is where to snorkel. Certainly there are suggestions. "Try Honolua . . . heard it's pretty clear." "Been to Olowalu? You might try there." Advice spews forth, but does anyone stop to ponder how sad things get when you have to search for decent ocean?

Here in Honokowai there is algae everywhere, fouling the beach, in thick green mats trapped between reefs, floating free like gruesome green Brillo pads, lodged in and around coral heads; in

fact, it is more Green Hawaii than Blue Hawaii.

I find it interesting that not only is nothing being done about it, few here even acknowledge a problem.

"Algae? It wasn't here a week ago . . . must have been the eclipse what brought it."

"Algae? Must be all the sun we've had lately."

My husband and I went to the Lahaina library. We rifled through the July, June and May back issues of The Maui News, expecting to find this algae of daily concern. Instead, not a peep from one day to the next.

Oh, we did find one article on stinky seaweed at Kahului and one about a diver holding up a strand of the green slime. (I can show you plenty places where a diver can be covered completely in the stuff). And one article was the crown jewel in all this — an article by Jill Engledow proclaiming we should welcome the stuff for use in our gardens, kind of like being joyous you got roaches because they can be dipped in chocolate and sold as a protein supplement!

There is so little being written or said about the algae that one wonders if there isn't some conspiracy of silence.

Algae can affect tourism, so let's pretend we don't notice.

Algae are plants. Anyone who knows anything about plants knows what makes them grow. Nitrogen; no mystery, nitrogen is a fertilizer.

To get this explosion of algae means somehow,

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conspiracy

somewhere nitrogen is getting into the waters off Honokowai. I can hazard a guess to possible sources — fertilizer from pineapple/sugar fields or inadequate treatment of sewage from the increased development here.

I have been videotaping the mess here. Between the reefs are algae carpets up to two feet thick. In the sand flats around 40 feet deep are acres of algae — acres — as green as far as visibility will allow.

Unless there is acknowledgement by your government that there is an algae problem, the Kaanapali/Honokowai/Kapalua area will have water more like Lake Erie sludge than Hawaiian pristine.

If you head makai straight from this condo, there is a turtle house with eight to 10 individuals all expecting to see me each morning. They have been there forever, and their ancestors were here before the first humans.

They are ancient but they have no pockets to carry any money, they aren't registered to vote, they can't lobby Congress, they can't even voice their concern. But I can!

The water here is disgusting; OK, allegedly disgusting from all this alleged algae.

Oh, and as for your island motto "Maui No Ka Oi" . . . Not if you're here to enjoy the water.

Ursula Keuper-Bennett is a resident of Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Council sees how algae is problem

By JILL ENGLEADOW
Staff Writer

WAILUKU — A videotape showing divers swimming in a forest of algae off Honokowai brought home the severity of the infestation of West Maui waters at a meeting yesterday of the County Council Public Works Committee.

Committee Chairman Pat Kawano thanked visiting divers Ursula and Peter Keuper-Bennett for showing the video and asked for a copy to send to Mayor Linda Crockett Lingle along with a council request for funding to pay for studies of the algal bloom.

If the mayor doesn't come up with funding within two weeks, Kawano said, the council will tackle the problem and try to find a source of funds. He said he will ask the state to contribute resources to the effort.

Committee members spent nearly three hours hearing testimony and asking questions of a variety of witnesses and experts in the council chambers.

Several speakers commented they had not realized the extent of the bloom until they saw the Keuper-Bennett's video, taken just off the coast near the Nohonani condominium the couple has visited each summer for years.

Mrs. Keuper-Bennett said the growth is worse at Honokowai than at either Kaaupali or Kapalua, and is thickest near a culvert now under construction. She said she and her husband believe the culvert is funneling extra nutrients into the water and feeding the growth there.

Keuper-Bennett said the 1991 bloom is worse than the one in 1989, and there was some algae growth at Honokowai in 1990, when it was not present in other areas.

The video shows divers swimming through clouds of the green stuff, shallow shoreline waters clogged with it and thick layers washing up along the beach. The Keuper-Bennetts said other visitors at their condo don't even want to go into the water,

See COUNCIL
on Page A5

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Council sees how algae bloom

Continued from Page A1

fearing it contains sewage.

Several other visiting and resident divers warned that the growth is ruining water quality, killing coral, threatening marine life and likely to do great damage to Maui's tourist trade.

They emphasized the necessity for immediate action because the bloom is growing fast and killing coral that will take decades to replace.

Steven Dollar, a marine biologist at the University of Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology, said he's never seen anything like the bloom the videotape depicted, and thinks "some change in the environment" has caused a disruption in the natural input of nutrients from land to sea to cause the bloom.

Dollar did a study last year, following the 1989 bloom, but concentrated on the water off Kaanapali and

found no sign of excess nutrients from the golf course or sewer treatment plant. There was no algal bloom off Kaanapali last year.

He said he did not know there was algae elsewhere along the coastline at the time, or he would have tested there.

Now, Dollar said, he "would love to be involved" in any effort to determine what is feeding the algae off West Maui. He specializes in studying how the "nutrient subsidy" of run-off from activities on the land affect the ocean. He said Maui has an unusual amount of "channelization" like the culvert the Keuper-Bennetts mentioned, and he has always wondered if that could cause problems in the sea.

Dollar said he's sampled water off every coastal golf course in the state and found few problems. "We don't see this kind of situation" anywhere in the islands, he said.

The kind of study Dollar specializes in would follow a study proposed by William Magruder, a marine botanist from the Bishop Museum. Magruder's proposal outlines a five-week study in which divers would document the location and extent of the bloom and would suggest the next step.

The study would cost \$14,880, and would result in "an educated opinion" about possible causes, and "our best ideas for managing it," Magruder said.

Magruder said ongoing monitoring is important, because a bloom like this could have been started by some event that took place months ago, such as a major storm washing nutrients into the sea.

Ray Tabata, associate director of the U.H. Sea Grant Extension Service, said Magruder's study "sounds like a good first step." He said Maui Community College Ma-

is a problem

rine Options Program students might be able to help conduct the study.

Tabata said U.H. botanist Isabella Abbott, an expert on seaweeds and especially on this particular alga, told committee analyst Wayne Boteilo she would oversee a laboratory experiment to learn how the alga, *Cladophora*, responds to different elements.

Tabata said he would like work with all the interested parties to solve the problem.

Eugene Akazawa, supervisor for the state's ocean water testing section, said his department would support any such effort by providing data the state has collected in monitoring the coastline. Akazawa said there have been findings of excess nitrogen at test sites in South Kihei, Wahikuli and Mahinahina, which "seems to indicate there is a problem" that could come from "anything on land."



The Maul News / MATTHEW THAYER photo

Diver Kevin McAfee examines the molted shell of a spiny lobster during a dive off the Honokowai coast. McAfee, a master dive instructor and president of Kapalua Dive Co., said the dense algae that has hit the coast between Honokowai and Kapalua has been devastating coral and other ma-

rine life. The thick algae floats with the currents and tides and clings to things like coral and the antennae of lobsters. He said much of the coral off Honokowai has been killed by the algae. "It's sad when you think of how long the stuff (coral) took to grow and this stuff is just killing it," McAfee said.