

The realities of the seaweed phenomenon and how it may effect your beach vacation

Mexico Insider: Sept 17, 2019

Journalist: Tim Miller

Travelers the world over have come to know about this amazing new phenomenon of that Atlantic. Its been known for centuries as simply, seaweed. The seaweed itself, also known as sargassum seaweed, is essential and even vital to the ocean's ecosystem. What makes it a phenomenon, is the overwhelming quantities washing a shore over the last few years, beginning in 2011.

The phenomenon has scientists scratching their heads and they cannot agree on the cause. Many are convinced it has nothing to do with global warming, while others are staunch supporters of global warming playing at least a roll in the vast increase. There is a consensus among scientists that suggest the huge seaweed blooms are the result of deforestation and using huge amount of fertilizer in areas in Africa. Africa is generally regarded by most scientists as the genesis point each year for this new problem for the tourist industry that stretches all through the Gulf of Mexico, and throughout the Caribbean and along the Eastern side of Mexico. It also reaches up through Southern Florida, the keys, and parts of the Eastern side of Florida.

The good news is that it is cyclical. There is a break, from September through March these shores are essentially free from any new seaweed washing up on shore. But from April through August, it has been a real challenge for many of the worlds most popular beaches and tourist towns. The amount of the seaweed washing up on shore varies widely as the trajectory of the plumes is very unpredictable. For example, one beach may be overloaded with seaweed, a major problem, while another just a few hundred yards away may have a very mild situation and quite manageable. It is very difficult to track, but now web sites have been popping up to do just that. Students at the university of Texas A & M have created a web site that tracks plume movements and even features links to cameras at various beaches so that would be travelers have up to the minute information about the seaweed situation. <http://seas-forecast.com/>

Please note the site is http and not yet up to the https standard as of this writing. However, the author has explored the site in detail without any trouble.

One of the most popular beaches in the world is Cancun, specifically the beach located within the famed Cancun hotel zone. Strangely, this stretch of beach has not been hit hard. Yet beaches only miles away along the Riviera Maya have suffered vast quantities, including the world famous Playa del Carmen. Along the coast of Playa del Carmen, a long floating barrier was even installed to help the incoming flow. The author has spoken personally to travelers to Playa del Carmen who said they go to the same place every year. They had never seen it so bad as in 2019. They said it did not bother them much because they like hanging out by the pool. They also said that in spite of it, they had equipment moving it out 24/7 and their resort still managed to keep the beach clean, although it was a 24/7 affair to get it done.

One question you might ask is, "what is a reasonable amount of seaweed on a beach so that we can still enjoy it? Another might be for the curious, how bad does it get? We have seen beaches in Texas with swaths on the beach that are 4ft high and 40 yards across. It should be noted this is an unusually

overwhelming case and not what you will see on the vast majority of the beaches throughout the region. But it is good to know the extreme. In Cancun, as a contrast, during the peak of "seaweed season" in late spring/early summer, you might see build up of 1ft deep by 5 yards across. Fortunately, these amounts are manageable and they are therefore removed daily, which is a huge factor in maintaining a degree of control over the huge new nemesis of the beaches. After all, these are resort towns and their livelihood depends on keeping their beaches seaweed free.

Even if there is a mild amount of seaweed, it is important that the resorts remove it. The main reason would appear that the beach looks much nicer without the dark foreign looking substance sitting there. But the bigger reason may be that when the seaweed begins to die, it smells very bad. Some have likened it to the smell of rotten eggs. So, to be sure, it is not pleasant in any way once on the beach.

This phenomenon has been in existence since 2011, with a one year exception in 2013. No scientist can offer any proof of why 2013 there was not seaweed problem. However since retuning in 2014 the trend has been that the problem is getting worse, not better. Moving forward, it's a good idea to keep your eye on sargassum movements and web cams before making your travel plans to this region of the world.