

problems

A LIFE ON THE WATER • CAPT. VAN HUBBARD 100,000 new

Welcome to the new year. With luck, we will encounter numerous fishing opportunities and adventures in 2017.

We also still have tons of remaining baggage to deal with, problems requiring serious soul-searching. I'd rather talk about fishing, but I feel the need to share these messages because I see the problems so plainly, and these waters sustain my lifestyle and business.

We need to discover compromises that will allow us to sustain our piece of paradise. What we now take for granted is rapidly deteriorating and will directly affect our fishing — but even more important, we risk our economy and survival. This may seem alarmist, but at some point, we need to stop trashing our local environment or sell out and abandon this sinking ship.

I have lived here almost 40 years and I'm extremely concerned about the decline I've seen in our water quality. Yes, it is very costly to address these water, sewage and population issues, but the cost of attempting to repair our waters and habitats is exponentially more.

Plus, if we allow these problems to pass a tipping point, we risk our property values crashing. This is the tax base that supports our government, and the dollars needed to fund costly attempts to replace what we carelessly threw away.

Recent red tides have devastated our waters. We have actually been lucky we haven't lost many more fish, dolphins and manatees. If you saw the bodies of rotting fish, you understand firsthand that we have suffered problems. While we don't completely understand the causes of red tide blooms, we do have many clues.

We have been dealing with a serious red tide problem since September.

Coincidentally (?) it started immediately after St. Petersburg and Sarasota dumped about a half-million gallons of raw sewage because of excess rains.

While we can't conclusively blame this outbreak on that spill, it is reasonable to observe a connection. We already had red tide in mild concentrations according to Mote's monitoring. It's logical to conclude this red tide rapidly multiplied when it was nourished by the runoff which acted as fertilizer.

We continue to push growth and development, but fail to adequately prepare for the waste more folks add.

The lure of jobs and money is tempting, but more people add more problems.

Charlotte County's leaders are finally accepting that septic tanks are seeping nitrogen (algae fertilizer) into our waters. These are the same waters we promote attempting to bring more folks into our area. I understand that we need growth, but we can't be stupid about it.

Each new home and family adds to our need for water and sewer treatment, yet many of our local leaders continue to push more people without an adequate plan to deal with the added

problems they create. We've been ignoring it, but when we pass a tipping point it will cost much more to address and attempt to correct our messes. Other waterfront communities have been through this and we should learn from their examples.

Dr. Brian Lapointe of Florida Atlantic University made an informative presentation at the last county commission meeting, educating our commissioners about septic tank problems. One critical point many have a hard time understanding about septic tanks: Even after we discontinue using them, nutrients from them will continue to find their way into our waters for a long time into the future. Our commission is finally trying to get it! They have a lot of considerations to deal with, but ultimately, we must protect the important things that support our economy and way of life.

Nothing is more important here than water. They did a great job protecting the drinking waters; now it's time to save our Harbor and wild waters that sustain our lifestyles. I see approval of at least 100,000 new homes around us, from River Road and the West Villages to Babcock Ranch, plus the new Murdock Village project. Adding a quarter-million new residents won't do much to improve our water quality. Maybe the manatee folks will pick up on our problems here; they seem to be able to get governments to listen.

Winter blew in briefly last weekend.

We have enjoyed awesome weather and fabulous press all over the nation with our great weather last year. We are spending hundreds of millions to convince millions more visitors to come to Florida, and this is great for our economy. But we might want to consider what level is sustainable instead of automatically assuming more is better. With careful planning, building and tourism can be sustainable industries. But if we overload our systems by not making preparations, we'll trash our fishing, boating and many more of our traditional outdoor activities — yes, and the quality of life all those new folks came here for!

I'm past the peak of my fishing career here, so this is not about me. It's about what we choose to leave for our children and grandchildren. I grew up in St. Pete and can go back if I must. It's stupid crowded there, but they have made impressive progress in improving their waters, while we have ignored tomorrow's problems in favor of making more money today. Which counts more in the long run: Making a few more bucks, or what we pass along to the future? It's time to tackle some of these problems while we can. And remember, you can't catch fish if you don't go fishin', so let's go fishin' soon.

Capt. Van Hubbard is a highly respected outdoor writer and fishing guide. He has been a professional USCG-licensed yearround guide since 1976, and has been fishing the Southwest Florida coast since 1981. Contact him at 941-468-4017 or VanHubbard@CaptVan.com.

Algal blooms, like this one on Lake Okeechobee, are often caused by manmade nutrient imbalances.

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