THE CHALLENGE OF STAYING CLEAN

Brian Tietz

WATER QUALITY IS STILL FRONT AND CENTER FOR BUSINESSES ALONG THE GULFSHORE

By Artis Henderson

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Fishing charter captain Daniel Andrews, 32, stands at the helm of his carbon-fiber and Kevlar flats boat. He's dressed in his work uniform: a pair of amphibious shorts, a long-sleeve sun shirt and polarized Costas. Most of his face is covered with a long brown beard. When he speaks, his voice is steady and sure, but he doesn't speak much; he says what he needs to say, and then he stops talking. He lets the water, the mangroves, the birds and the fish speak for him.

Andrews is an unlikely spokesperson. He spends more than 300 days each year on the water; more at home here than anywhere else. He'd look odd in a suit, odder still in a legislative building. Yet Andrews heads what is arguably the most visible water-protection group in Southwest Florida: Captains for Clean Water.

It's been four years since the devastating outbreak of 2018, when discharges from Lake Okeechobee contributed to a red tide and blue-green algae infestation that killed more than 2,000 tons—that's more than 4 million pounds—of marine life and resulted in millions of dollars of lost tourism business across Lee and Collier counties. That outbreak led to a massive effort by many groups, and resulted in important changes in how Florida approaches its environmental policy. "Twenty-eighteen" became their rallying cry.

After the ecological and financial devastation of that year, it seemed unlikely that water quality problems would ever resurface. The state of Florida had changed for the better. We'd had our reckoning and survived, and now things would be different going forward. But if history has taught us anything, it's that we rarely learn our lessons.

In February of this year, Senate Bill 2508 was introduced in the Florida Senate. The bill prioritized irrigating agriculture—mostly Big Sugar—over sending much-needed water south into the Everglades. It would have gutted existing plans to protect Florida's waterways. "It was a disaster," says Eric Eikenberg, CEO of the Everglades Foundation. "It was going to roll back a lot of the progress being made." He called the

DEADLY BLOOMS

An outbreak of red tide and blue-green algae killed more than 4 million pounds of marine life in 2018.

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bill a "powerplay concocted by the sugar industry."

The combined advocacy of the Everglades Foundation and Captains for Clean Water created a groundswell of opposition to the bill. Though it passed in amended form, SB 2508 was ultimately vetoed by Gov. Ron DeSantis in June. At a press conference held at Doc Ford's on Fort Myers Beach, surrounded by fishing guides in their Captains for Clean Water hats—Andrews behind his right shoulder—DeSantis reaffirmed his commitment to protecting Florida's natural resources.

The day was a victory, but Senate Bill 2508 still serves as a reminder that Southwest Florida must remain vigilant. "Policymakers thought we forgot," Andrews says. "But we didn't."

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GOVERNMENT ACTION

In June, Gov. Ron DeSantis vetoed Senate Bill 2508, reaffirming his commitment to Florida's natural resources.

KITCHEL KEY

Andrews' boat doesn't have a name, but he sometimes calls it his "office." Today he's working late. It's almost 5 p.m. on a Thursday, and the sun is low in the sky as we load up at the Punta Rassa boat ramp beside the Sanibel causeway. Andrews is at the throttle, and to his left sits Charlette Roman, a governing board member of the South Florida Water Management District and chair of the Big Cypress Basin Board. Roman is here as part of an impact tour. Andrews and the other charter boat captains who make up Captains for Clean Water regularly take policymakers and decision influencers out to see exactly what's at stake on the water. It's a perspective that's impossible without someone like him.

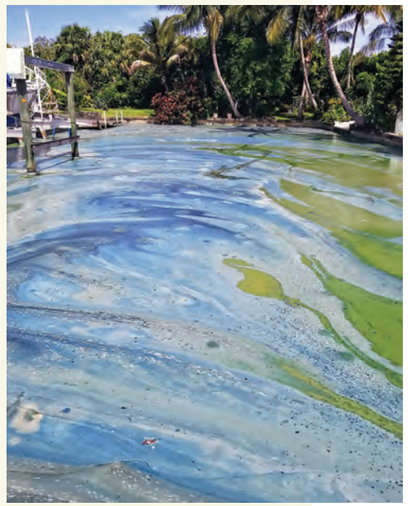
He backs the boat away from the dock and points the bow north into San Carlos Bay. It's 85 degrees, the low sun casting a golden light over the water, and swells are less than two feet. This is the kind of easy,

_WHY CLEAN WATER MATTERS

By the end of April 2022, according to data from Visit Florida, the state had already numbered 42.9 million visitors and collected $9 billion in tourism revenue. That accounted for 22 million jobs across the state.

"When people ask me what's at stake with water quality, these are the numbers I give them," says John Lai, president and CEO of the Sanibel and Captiva Chamber of Commerce.

He points out that the tourist tax—also known as the bed tax; a 5% tax generated every time a visitor pays for accommodations—bankrolls local beach restoration and the spring training baseball stadiums, perks that Southwest Florida residents enjoy. But when tourist numbers disappear, like they did in 2018, these perks fall away. "Without water quality, our residents suffer," Lai says.



ECOLOGICAL DEVASTATION

Dead seagrass (above right) and toxic blue-green algae in canals are the result of environmental imbalances.

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pleasant afternoon that explains why our area is called the Paradise Coast.

"Do you normally fish in a flats boat like this?" Roman asks.

"I like this kind of boat," Andrews says. "A lot of guys are switching to bigger boats, but the places I like to go have shallower water and you need a boat like this."

"So you grew up on the water?"

Andrews nods. "I was born on Sanibel, but we moved to Fort Myers when I was a couple of months old. My parents owned a Scandinavian furniture store in Fort Myers. They wanted me to take over, but I worked there long enough to know I didn't want to peddle furniture."

"You would have been indoors the whole time," Roman says.

Andrews frowns. "Yeah."

A party boat passes us on the starboard side. It's a sleek powerboat with four Yamaha engines hanging off the back that make a loud thrumming. The stereo blasts Naughty by Nature, and girls in bikinis dance on the bow. A group of shirtless, muscular guys cluster in the stern. Andrews shakes his head. "Not how I like to spend my time on the water," he says.

We pass channel marker 11. An anhinga skims across the water off the port side. We're not far from the boat ramp at Punta Rassa when Andrews slows the engine to neutral. Kitchel Key sits on our left. We're at the end of the outgoing tide, and spits of sand have surfaced.

"This used to be one of the most consistent places to fish," Andrews says. To the uninitiated eye, the water looks like any other

"We're all here because of this beautiful area and the gorgeous ecosystem that our livelihoods and quality of life depend on. You see the vibrant community all around here and how reliant the economy is on clean water. It's an incredible responsibility."

—Charlette Roman, governing board member of the South Florida Water Management District and chair of the Big Cypress Basin Board

CAUSE AND EFFECT

Toxic discharges from Lake Okeechobee flow to Sanibel Lighthouse Point in 2018.

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spot in the mangrove channels that wind through the bay. But not to Andrews. "When I was a kid, you'd see 60 to 80 roseate spoonbills through here on this tide. Herons, egrets. Wading sea birds. But the sea grass through here was wiped out by the discharges from the Okeechobee."

Roman, who is a Florida Master Naturalist and has participated in a number of bird counts, looks out over the water. "There's not many in there," she agrees.

"I'm not much of a bird person," Andrews says, "but I can travel anywhere and find the types of birds that would have fish around them. I look at that flat now and know there's not going to be any fish."

We gaze for a moment longer before he pushes the throttle forward and noses the boat back into the channel, headed north.

TAKING THE HELM

Captains for Clean Water was founded in 2016 by Andrews and his buddy Captain Chris Wittman, both local fishing guides who believed that if people were educated on what was happening to our waters, they'd put a stop to the damage. A grassroots nonprofit, Captains focuses its energies on awareness and education. Its logo—emblazoned on bumper stickers, hats and T-shirts—has become one of the most recognizable symbols of the fight for clean water in Southwest Florida.

Along the way, "Captains for Clean Water" has become synonymous with "the good guys." The group has wide-ranging support that stretches across the political spectrum, counting Republicans, Democrats and Independents among its members. How have they done it? "We keep the focus on issues that impact our waterways, mainly the Okeechobee discharges," Andrews says. "We certainly have strong political opinions individually, but we like to keep Captains as narrowly focused as possible. I think people like that."

Another reason for the group's success: its inclusivity. Captains doesn't make a distinction among the different factions fighting for the cause. For a long time, protecting local waters was the purview of environmentalists. And environmentalists were often at odds with the needs of the local economy—hotels, restaurants and tourism operators. But 2018 changed that, said John Lai, president and CEO of the Sanibel and Captiva Chamber of Commerce. "After that year, we realized that there was so much at stake in terms of the sustainability of the natural beauty of Southwest Florida, but also the sustainability of our local businesses. For the first time, the hospitality and tourism businesses walked hand-in-hand with the conservation groups instead of going toe-to-toe."

Researchers at the University of Florida say the tourism sector lost roughly $184 million because of the 2018 outbreak. Nearly 3,000 jobs were cut across the state. Lai, who worked in the resort and hospitality industry for decades before taking over the Sanibel-Captiva Chamber, lists businesses that he personally knew were affected by the devastation: a linen company on Sanibel whose revenue took a 32% dive because of the lost business at hotels and restaurants; a bike/boat/beach gear rental business that went from 110 employees to 17; a local lure-making company that saw a 40% decrease in sales because charter captains stopped buying. "These are the things we need to remind legislators about," Lai says. "We need to hold them accountable to the promises they made about water quality when they were voted into office in 2018."

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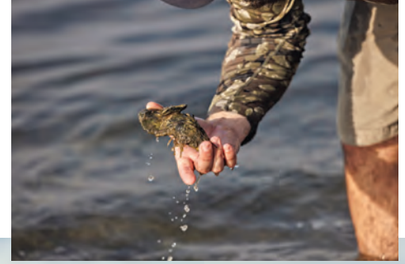
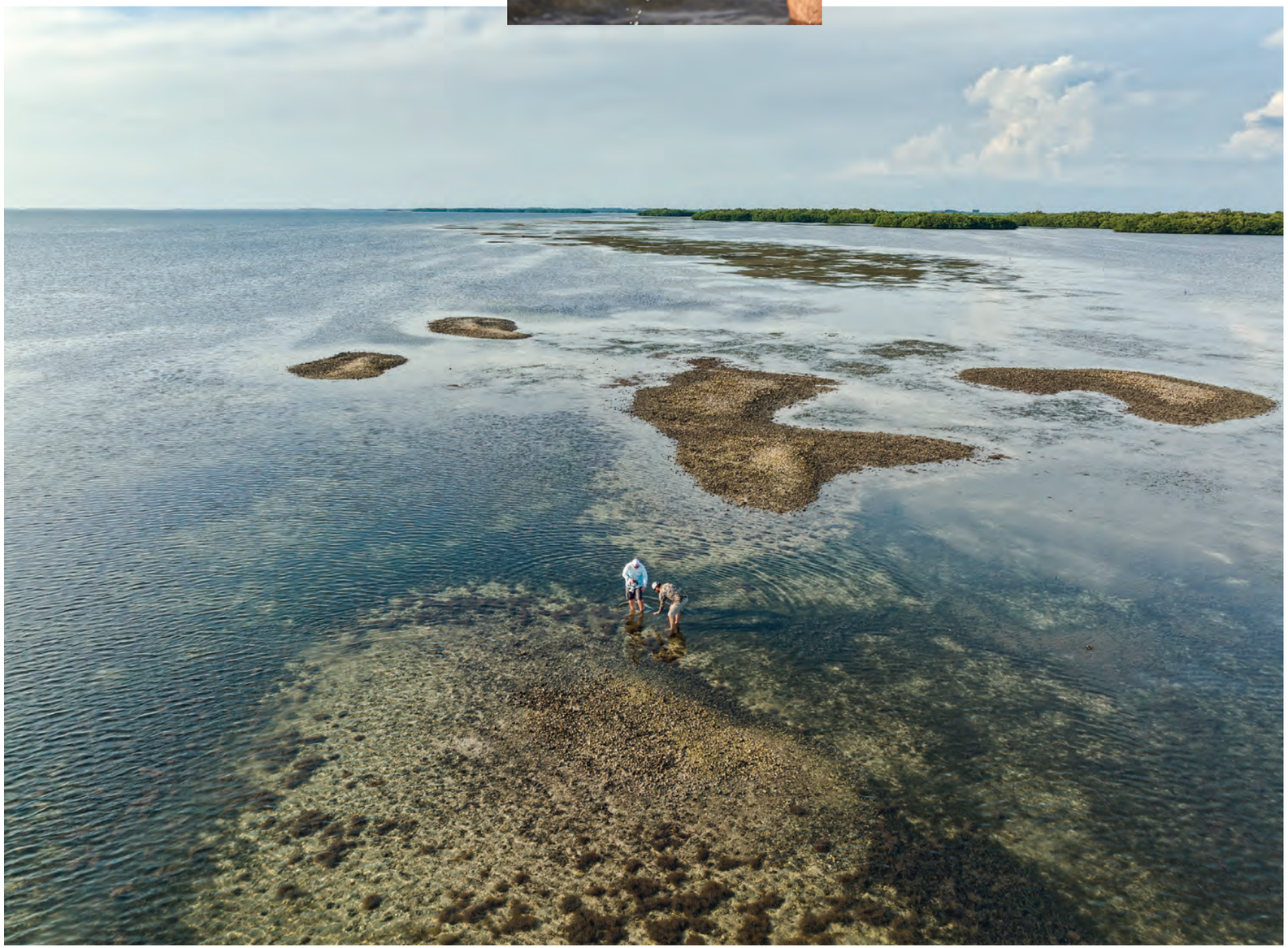
CAPTAINS FOR CLEAN WATER

The grassroots nonprofit focuses on education and awareness of issues that impact our waterways.





DEAD ZONE

What should be the most productive part of the estuary now lacks oyster beds and seagrasses at Pine Island Sound.

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The challenge is keeping the message top-of-mind for policymakers when Southwest Florida has had a series of good years, as it has recently. But for those in the tourism industry who rely on clean water, the danger is never far away. "We've come to realize that it doesn't take a lot for our waters to go from pristine to what we saw in 2018," Lai says. "It's still a constant threat. Every single year."

THE BARREL OF THE GUN

We motor north for another 10 minutes. Across San Carlos Bay, the late afternoon wind dies down and the water flattens out. A sport fishing boat passes us on the left, cruising through the deeper channel. Outside the channel, Andrews drops the engine and noses the boat against the sandy bottom of the flats. To the north is Cape Coral, to the east is Fort Myers, to the south is Sanibel and to the west is Pine Island.

"On a map, it looks far apart," Roman says. "But here on the water you can see how interconnected everything is."

Andrews nods. He points to our right, to a rush of water and an open space that heads east: the mouth of the Caloosahatchee River. "We're at the barrel of the gun," he says. "All of our discharges come out and push into the bay right here."

This is a convergence zone, a place where several tides meet, where the flow of the Caloosahatchee joins San Carlos Bay. It should be the most productive part of the estuary—but it's a dead zone. "There's isn't a blade of sea grass to be found within eyeshot of where we are now," Andrews says. "When I was a kid, this was a labyrinth of oyster bars all the way up through the channel. It's just skeletons now."

He and Roman lean over the edge of the boat and inspect the pale bottom that was once dark with sea grass. "If we had a rewind button and I could crank it back 20 years, we'd be snook fishing all through here," Andrews says.

Though 2018 is the year we remember, the worst of the discharges began in 2013. That's when an influx of fresh water changed the salinity of the bay, wiping out the oyster beds. It also increased the turbidity of the water, blocking the sunlight that sea grasses need to survive, like putting a blanket over the front lawn.

"This bar used to be full of life," Andrews says. "There'd be mullet jumping. We'd see bull sharks, black tips, tarpon, ladyfish, jacks." He stops and shakes his head. "I don't even come here anymore. It's depressing."

A COMMON SENSE SOLUTION

Barry Rosen, a professor in the department of ecology and environmental studies at the Water School at Florida

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Gulf Coast University, has spent years studying blue-green algae. Despite extensive research, scientists are still stymied over what exactly causes an outbreak such as the one in 2018. "Everyone's looking for a magic bullet," Rosen says. "But you can't treat the water like it's a swimming pool."

Algal blooms, such as red tide in salt water and the cyanobacteria commonly called blue-green algae in fresh water, happen because of complex interactions and competition with other living organisms that evolved over millions of years. Red tide and blue-green algae are highly adapted not only to survive but to thrive. Both organisms exist naturally in innocuous amounts, kept under control by a natural system of checks and balances. But once one element gets out of whack—higher than normal water temperatures, for example, or an excess of nutrients—the organisms go into overdrive, creating an overabundance of brevetoxins in the case of red tide and choking out the oxygen from waterways in the case of cyanobacteria, which have their own suite of toxins.

It's similar to cancer cells in the human body, Rosen said. When the body is in balance, everything's in order. "There's only a problem when the cells proliferate."

What causes this proliferation isn't exactly certain. Sunlight is a factor. Water temperature is a factor. Nutrients are a factor. By the time scientists realize there's a problem, it's often too late. That's why Captains for Clean Water is calling for what it calls the most direct, common-sense solution: Stop the Okeechobee discharges. Unlike sunlight and water temperature, which we can't control, this is one factor we can do something about.

POWER LINES

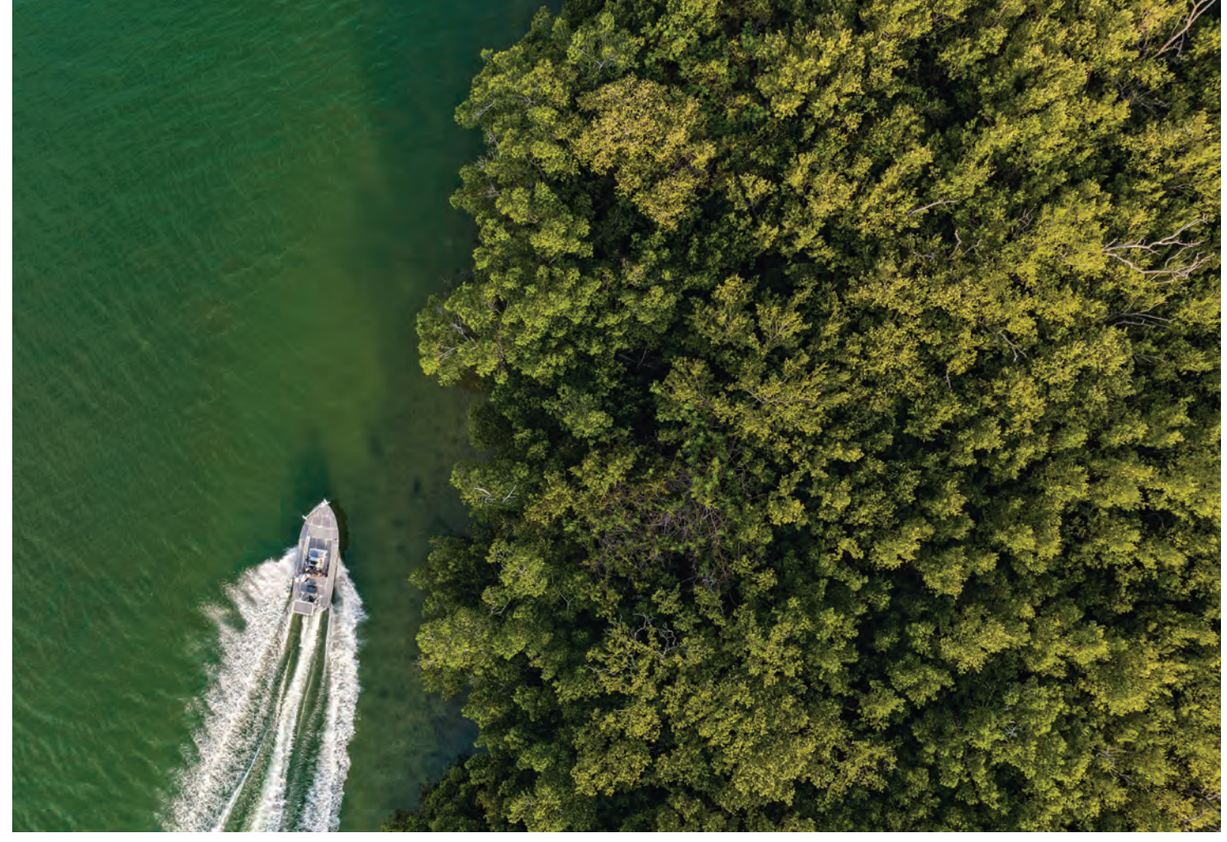
Andrews points the boat westward. The sun sits near the horizon. The only sounds are the wind rushing past and the slap of the waves against the gunwale. We pass Picnic Island and over the boat engine, Andrews says, "This area has become a transit zone. There's still some good tarpon fishing but now most of the fishing is up in Pine Island Sound." We cruise for another stretch until we reach the power lines that carry electricity to Sanibel. Here, Andrews slows the engine. Where the water gets shallow, he noses the boat on top of the flats. "This is one of the first places you start to see sea grass," he says. "This is about where I would start fishing."

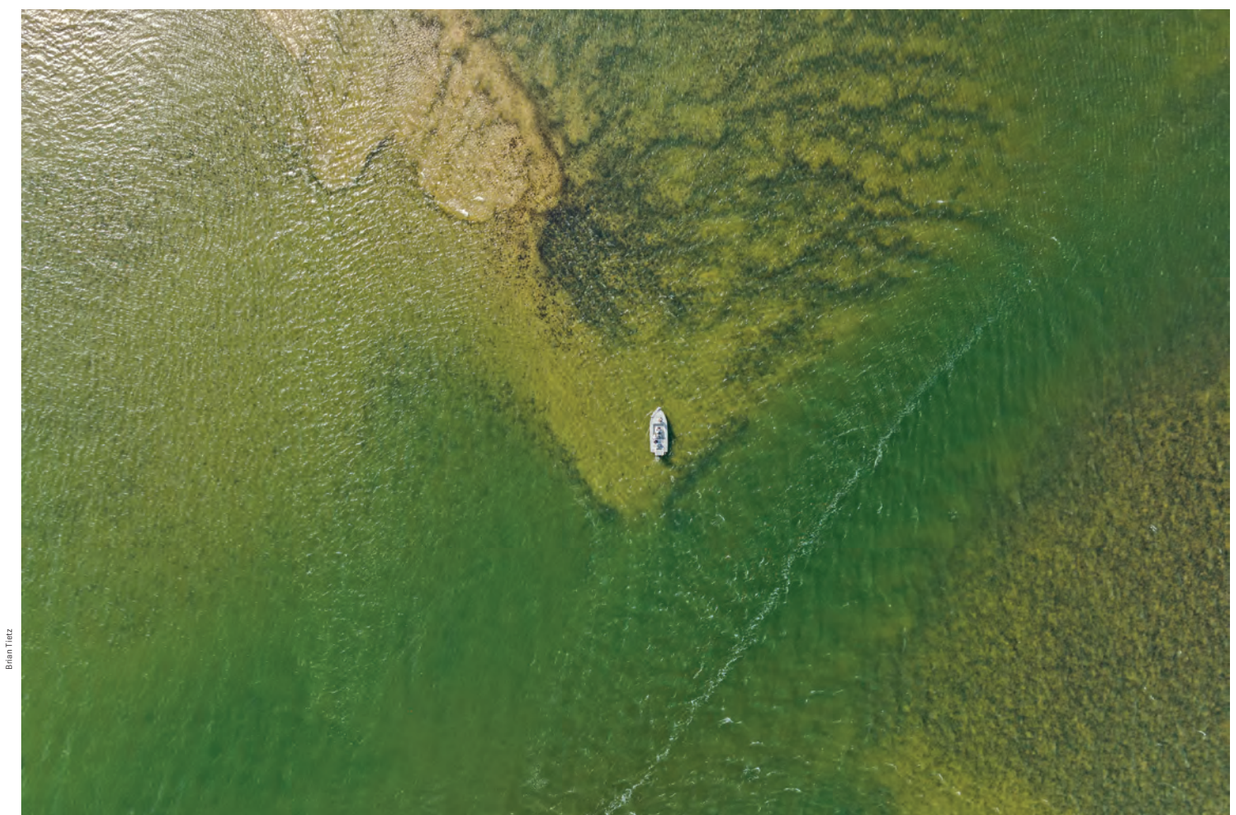
Roman leans over the side of the boat and inspects the bottom. "Turtle grass," she says. "And it's good grass." She looks out over the flats, naming the different types of birds here. "Tricolored heron, little blue heron, great blue heron, pelicans, of course. A reddish egret just flew by, and there are some white ones over there, maybe a juvenile roseate spoonbill."

A gentle breeze whistles through the mangrove island behind us. The sky has softened to a pale blue. Cumulus clouds stack on the horizon and we hear the rumble of distant thunder, but over the bay the sky is clear. "We couldn't ask for a better day," Roman says.

We watch a dolphin leap out of the water in the distance. A mullet jumps beside the boat. Andrews sits down in the stern and strips off his socks and shoes. He hops over the side of the boat into ankle-deep water, saying, "The farther away we get from the mouth of the river, the healthier everything is."

He sets off across the flat, barefoot in the shallow water, silhouetted against the setting sun. He stops every now and then to reach down and pick up a live shell or a clump of seaweed. Roman stands at the bow and watches him. "If we could all go out with Captain Andrews, we wouldn't have any problems with our water," she says.





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◂ **OUTBREAK CAUSES**

Scientists still aren't certain what causes the outbreaks, but sunlight, water temperature and nutrients are all factors.