

BBT COLUMNISTS

HARPER ON THE ENVIRONMENT

You Are What You Fish!

By Jim Harper
BBT Columnist

You might want to think twice before ordering the fish. If it was caught nearby, it may have been filling its belly with sewage, and that's not what you want swimming in your belly.

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Miami Flight Seeing

This is one of Southeast Florida's dirtiest little secrets: Unlike the rest of the state, we dump most of our wastewater, including sewage, offshore through giant pipes called ocean outfalls.

And where there are outfalls, there are fish feeding on a fetid cocktail that I like to call "schmung." Some fishermen simply call it "the stink hole," and it is one of their dirty secrets, too.

The two Miami-Dade pipes originate from the wastewater treatment plants on Virginia Key and in North Miami, the latter located just north of N.E. 151st Street, east of Biscayne Boulevard.

From there, imagine a pipe eight feet in diameter running east, toward the



Forget about sharks, pirates and sea-monsters. This frightening pipe, two miles off the shore of Haulover Beach, spews our human waste 24/7 into the ocean.

Photo courtesy of Steve Spring



beach at Haulover Park, and then two miles out to sea (hopefully without too many leaks). Upon resurfacing, it leaves a fresh, chlorinated scent in the air.

It's ironic that a place built on the good fortune of its coastline would treat it like a cesspool, but that has been the practice for the last few decades in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach Counties, which have two ocean outfalls apiece.



Every day these six pipes send close to 400 million gallons of partially treated wastewater into the sea.

Partially or secondarily treated wastewater contains high levels of nitrogen and does not filter out the parasites *Cryptosporidium* or *Giardia*, which cause severe diarrhea and deadly infections in immuno-compromised individuals. In marine fish, this type of effluent causes boy fish to become girly-fish, according to a study published last year by the Southern California Coastal Water Research Project.

You know something is wrong when your flounder with lemon turns out to be a sweet transvestite.

Still, the outfalls' effects are mainly invisible, especially in Miami-Dade County, where the pipes' endpoints are located two miles offshore in 100-foot-deep water. But the other four pipes are closer to shore and are major suspects in the sharp decline of our reefs.

This potential threat has earned greater scrutiny this year, particularly now that two species of coral in South Florida's waters have been listed as "threatened" under the federal Endangered Species Act. Preliminary scientific studies point toward the obvious: These outfalls are coral assassins, not to mention a serious kink in our local seafood supply.

A new report by the University of Florida on South Florida's six outfalls lays out their current status and sounds the call for alternatives. (Google "Ocean Outfall Study" to get the full 241-page report, which was funded by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.) The leading alternative is to reuse as much water as possible (see last month's column on this topic). It is both environmentally responsible and relatively affordable for our counties, according to the report's projections.

Other alternatives to reduce the impact of ocean outfalls include the diversion of wastewater to deep-injection wells or additional cleansing prior to release. But these options compare poorly with the state's priority, which is reuse.

It seems that Miami-Dade County would rather wait until a tourist gets run over by a mutant fish before making any responsible changes. Instead, the Miami-Dade Water and Sewer Department has plans to open up two new ocean outfalls, according to the report. Such plans should not even be on the table.

In fact, the state wants us to shift into reverse. Instead of pouring wastewater out,

we should be finding ways to pour it back onto the earth as irrigation, for example. The new requirements are spelled out in last year's law based on Senate Bill 444.

This law demands responsible water management by making it a prerequisite for all new development. Already nine construction projects in Miami-Dade have been rejected due their inability to demonstrate responsible water management, and more are going to be canned until the county gets serious about large-scale water conservation.

This is a serious dilemma for construction-crazed Miami. It's as if the state is looking us in the eye and saying: "Read my lips. No new condos." Want to keep on building, Miami? Then reduce, reuse, and recycle your water, and decrease or cease dumping it at sea.

Broward County has plans to shut down its ocean outfalls and move toward 100 percent reuse of its wastewater within ten years, that according to the South Florida Water Management District. Palm Beach already leads the three counties in reuse, and its outfalls are under constant attack by the Palm Beach County Reef Rescue, a group which monitors sewer outfalls' impact on the reef system and reviews the discharge monitoring reports from sewer plants. Sounds like a plan that could work here, too.

What's a conscientious Miamian to do? After contacting the County Commission, pause for a moment before fertilizing your lawn. Fertilizers spread during the wet season are more likely to wash away into our already-stressed waterways and out to sea. Save it for the dry season, and even then, tread lightly by using a low-nitrogen fertilizer.

Also, the next time you do eat fish, find out where it comes from and try to get an idea of what it has been eating. The same principle applies all across the food chain: You are what you eat.

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