

Terror in the water — Pfiesteria causes hysteria

A dinoflagellate is responsible for the deaths of a large number of fish in North Carolina. The microorganism can be found from Delaware to the Gulf of Mexico.

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — Millions of fish in North Carolina's marshlands have turned up dead with ugly, open sores caused by a microorganism that feeds on their blood. Now some scientists suspect the organism preys on humans, too.

More than a dozen fishermen, divers and others have found open sores on their bodies, reported feeling faint or complained of memory loss after coming into contact with brown water fouled with dead fish.

The organism killing the fish is known as pfiesteria, and biologists call it "the cell from hell." Pfiesteria has been likened to the piranha of the microbial world. Yet a piranha would not stand a chance against this

bloodthirsty menace.

Scientists say the tiny organisms secrete a toxin that eats holes in fish, then slowly paralyzes their muscles and suffocates them.

North Carolina State University researcher JoAnn Burkholder, who helped discover the one-celled organism in 1990, is convinced pfiesteria's toxins sickened her and as many as nine other researchers. She and a fellow researcher said they suffered severe neurological symptoms, including memory loss, after handling the organism in a lab in 1993.

But she said state health officials seem more concerned with avoiding bad publicity that could harm tourism than investigating the possible danger to humans. Although the state committed \$585,000 to study pfiesteria in 1995, the money is just now making its way to researchers.

"We still need to know an awful lot," Burkholder said. "It's an unfortunate tragedy that we don't know more by now."

State officials defended their efforts, saying they are collecting evidence and studying the problem and there is no proof the organism attacks humans. "We continue to try to gather information within the limits of

our resources," said Mike Moser, director of epidemiology.

Pfiesteria, a one-celled organism called a dinoflagellate, has existed for thousands and perhaps millions of years. It has been found as far north as Delaware and as far south as the Gulf of Mexico. It can live in either fresh or salt water.

Nowhere has the tiny killer been more prevalent than in North Carolina's huge estuaries, where slow-moving saltwater is captured behind the islands of the Outer Banks. It has left millions of menhaden, shad and flounder dead and rotting on the shores of the Neuse and New rivers.

Burkholder's research indicates the tiny creatures proliferate and take on a deadly form when exposed to high levels of nitrogen and phosphorus — byproducts of human and animal waste.

She and others believe the organism became a problem in North Carolina waters as the state's hog farming industry and population rose dramatically over the past decade.

David Jones, a New Bern fisherman who once ran a wholesale fish market on the river shores, is convinced pfiesteria is responsible for the severe memory lapses and other neurological problems he says he suffers.

Jones said his problems began in 1988, when he experienced what he thought was heat stroke while working his crab pots during a fish kill.

"This stuff is real, and it's bad, and I certainly wouldn't want you or anyone else to have it," he said. "What's inside of me eating me alive?"

Questions about pfiesteria's effects on people have grown since a book tracing its discovery, *And the Waters Turned to Blood* by Rodney Barker, was released earlier this month. State officials have criticized the book and complained it created hysteria.

Burkholder said proving people's health problems are caused by pfiesteria is difficult because researchers have yet to isolate and identify its toxins.

Until then, doctors will not be able to test people's blood or tissues for evidence that the sores or other symptoms have been caused by pfiesteria.

Dr. Chris Delaney, a New Bern physician who has treated two people with skin sores, criticized the state's handling of the issue.

"I don't see this as high science, but the political lay of the land is such that there is a lot of resistance to change," he said.

► Nation Hale-Bopp makes big hit on Internet

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Hale-Bopp comet, which has put on one of the year's best celestial fireworks displays on the Internet, too. NASA says the Hale-Bopp computer sites have been serving up 1.2 million images a day.

The NASA sites have 4,500 pages of the comet, submitted by professional and back-yard astronomers from around the world.

The Comet Hale-Bopp Home Page includes a photograph made by a California astronomer the night after the comet was discovered in July 1995. The address is <http://www.jpl.nasa.gov/comet/halebopp.html>.

Correction

In a page 1 story in yesterday's Battalion, it should have read that Anderson, an educational administration graduate student, won the Sasse Community and Unity Award.

► This day in history

Today is Thursday, April 17, the 107th day of 1997. There are 258 days left in the year.

On this date:

- In 1492, a contract was signed by Christopher Columbus and a representative of Spain's King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, giving Columbus a commission to seek a westward ocean passage to Asia.
- In 1524, Giovanni da Verrazano reached present-day New York harbor.
- In 1790, American statesman Benjamin Franklin died in Philadelphia at age 84.
- In 1861, the Virginia State Convention voted to secede from the Union.
- In 1941, Yugoslavia surrendered to Germany in World War II.
- In 1961, about 1,500 CIA-trained Cuban exiles launched the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in a failed attempt to overthrow the government of Fidel Castro.

In 1964, Ford Motor Company unveiled its new Mustang model.

In 1964, Jerrie Mock of Columbus, Ohio, became the first woman to complete a solo airplane flight around the world.

In 1969, a jury in Los Angeles convicted Sirhan Sirhan of assassinating Sen. Robert F. Kennedy.

In 1970, the astronauts of Apollo 13 splashed down safely in the Pacific, four days after a ruptured oxygen tank crippled their spacecraft.

► Today's birthdays

Rock promoter Don Kirshner is 63. Composer-musician Jan Hammer is 49. Actress Olivia Hussey is 46. Rock singer-musician Pete Shelley (Buzzcocks) is 42. Actress Lela Rochon is 33. Singer Liz Phair is 30.

► Weather

Today	Tonight	Tomorrow	Highs & Lows
			Today's Expected High: 76°F
Partly cloudy with isolated showers.	Partly cloudy.	Partly cloudy with isolated showers.	Tonight's Expected High: 58°F
			Tomorrow's Expected High: 80°F
			Tomorrow Night Expected Low: 62°F

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