

Chemicals wreak havoc on bay life



The high levels of chemicals entering Roebuck Bay are being investigated.

JAN LEWIS

FOR residents of Broome, wet season rains are a time of celebration as the weather cools and watering the garden is no longer necessary. However, for marine life in Roebuck Bay, it's a different story.

Many stormwater drains in older parts of Broome are deep-sided and eroded. During the first wet season cloudbursts, water pours down these drains, flushing everything en route straight into Roebuck Bay.

Garbage, dead leaves, palm fronds, pindan, fertiliser washed off gardens, and chemicals can end up on the mudflats.

Does this matter? Many people believe it does.

Since 2005, the flushing of stormwater drains each year has been followed by an outbreak of algae which forms thick slimy mats over the mud and seagrass of the tidal flats.

A few months later when it dies, the algae, which is called Lyngbya, washes up on the shores of the bay in thick smelly piles.

In 2009 the Lyngbya pollution stretched as far as Crab Creek.

Fishermen report that fish avoid places where Lyngbya is growing; shellfish collectors have found that touching Lyngbya can cause nasty



Broome's ageing and polluted stormwater drains can cause havoc in Roebuck Bay.

Pictures: Jan Lewis

rashes, nausea and even breathing difficulties.

Scientists are concerned that the smothering of seagrass beds will have an impact on food supplies for dugongs and green turtles. Unsurprisingly, tourists alike are repelled by smelly beaches.

Lyngbya grows in a warm, nutrient-rich environment, thriving where levels of nitrogen and phosphorus in the water are high.

Studies are underway to identify how high levels of nitrogen and phosphorus are entering the bay.

It is possible that historical actions, such as discharging effluent from the abattoir into the bay until the 1990s, have raised the base levels of nutrients which now only need a little top-up each year for Lyngbya growth to be stimulated.

Stormwater drains are a candidate for providing that top-up as they channel dried chemicals from roads into the bay.

These chemicals include fertiliser washed onto roads by badly designed or maintained garden sprinkler systems; pool chemicals such as phosphates from discharged swimming pool water; detergents from cars that are washed on the road, and chemicals from rotting garbage and plant material.

As the town grows, so too does the amount of chemicals that can potentially enter the bay.

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