Guest opinion: Audubon Florida expert expresses concern with red tide's impact on birds

From a distance, the beaches look normal. White sand meets a blue Gulf of Mexico and an even bluer sky. But already I know that something is amiss as I spot a struggling Royal Tern and Herring Gull at the edge of the waves: red tide is here again.

Reports from beachgoers and biologists alike confirm that a red tide bloom is sickening and killing a wide range of wildlife species, including Royal Terns. These white seabirds with shaggy black caps and flamboyant orange bills mostly feed offshore, and are a “canary in the coal mine” for our coastal systems. Even when the nearshore seems clear,
Royal Terns suffering from brevetoxin exposure — the toxin produced by the red tide organism — are a sign that the bloom lurks offshore where these birds forage.

**Red tide is caused by blooms of *Karenia brevis***. It is true, this algae is naturally occurring, and red tide blooms have occurred throughout history. However, nitrogen and phosphorus flowing into our bays, estuaries, and coasts from upstream urban and agricultural run-off, septic tanks, and more have collided head-on with warming Gulf of Mexico temperatures as a result of climate change. Warmer waters and high nutrient levels create ideal conditions for blooms. In recent years, red tide has occurred more often, covered greater areas, and has persisted for much longer than what we used to consider “normal.”
The bad news is that our impacts on watersheds are responsible for creating coastal conditions that are favorable to the red tide organism. The good news? We can make them less favorable with the following actions:

**Protect and restore wetlands:** Healthy rivers and swamps, lakes, and cypress domes are not just havens for wildlife, they attenuate flood waters in storm events, protect our communities from wildfire in times of drought, and absorb the nutrients that would otherwise feed red tide before they reach the coast. Stopping and reversing the loss of wetlands is essential to turning this tide.
Rein in nutrient pollution: Phosphorus and nitrogen from farms and septic tanks, lawns and golf courses all feed harmful algal blooms—and these sources have only grown with Florida’s population growth. Ensuring that federal, state, and local rules protecting water quality are strong and enforced doesn’t just make environmental sense, it makes economic sense. Red tides not only impact our health and quality of life, but our tourist economy and property values too.

Fight Climate Change: Red tide likes few things more than warm ocean temperatures. Transitioning to renewable energy sources and reducing energy consumption through efficiency measures doesn’t just help us slow climate change, it saves consumers and taxpayers money and protects our way of life in the face of rising seas and hurricanes. As a state, Floridians expect our decision-makers to not only address resiliency—treating the symptoms of climate change like erosion and flooding—but also the causes, to head off the worst impacts. If you hate red tide, you have to care about climate change.

Along Florida’s coastal beaches, Audubon staff and volunteers are preparing for shorebird and seabird nesting season. Soon, these plovers and terns, skimmers and oystercatchers will be laying their eggs in shallow scrapes in the sand, using their bodies to shade them from the harsh
Florida sun, and raising their chicks on the prey they can glean from the Gulf of Mexico. We can only hope that red tide dissipates before then and stays away throughout the duration of the nesting season.

Our Florida birds are already vulnerable to dwindling habitat from sea level rise and disturbance — we must do whatever we can to protect them from the negative impacts of red tide. And in saving them, we may yet save our own way of life too.

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