

a variety of reasons since then. Industrial areas of Europe and North America have lost eelgrass due to pollution, and in recent years eelgrass populations have disappeared from most parts of the Chesapeake Bay. Dr. Robert Orth of the Virginia Institute of Marine Science attributes this to increased runoff, particularly from agriculture, which causes more turbidity in the water and hence less light reaching the plants.

According to Dr. Short of UNH the decline of eelgrass in New Hampshire and adjoining coasts seems caused by disease rather than pollution.

Short says one of the most noticeable characteristics of the dieoff is the absence of wrack, or dead grass, found along the shores of the areas affected.

Eelgrass also plays an important role in the nutrient cycle in estuaries. Through its natural dieoff and decomposition, large amounts of organic matter are slowly released into the marine ecosystem. According to Dr. Kenneth Mann of the Bedford Institute of Oceanography in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, "The loss of eelgrass production can only reduce the productivity of associated food webs." In addition, eelgrass helps control erosion by stabilizing sediments. The loss of eelgrass beds would cause increased amounts of siltation, resulting in costly dredging to keep rivers and harbors navigable.

If the eelgrass blight were to spread to the Maritimes one of the noticeable losses would be to the wildfowl populations which depend on eelgrass for food. Following the '30s dieoff, ducks and geese which feed on eelgrass roots suffered major losses. Brant geese populations declined by over 90 percent. Some waterfowl which did survive altered their migration patterns in search of more food.

Dr. Short hopes to expand his study of the eelgrass decline along the East Coast. At present he is "looking for more money" to continue studies. While some support has come from New Hampshire state agencies and waterfowl associations Dr. Short admits he is somewhat dismayed by the lack of funding; especially considering the far-ranging economic and ecological consequences if another full-scale eelgrass blight were to occur.

Dr. Short and other scientists present at a conference on eelgrass held at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Massachusetts last fall stressed the need to document, especially through aerial surveys, existing eelgrass beds so that future declines will be noticed.

At present it is uncertain whether the current disappearance of eelgrass will spread to the coast of Atlantic Canada. If it does reach the Maritimes, as it did in the '30s, the impact on the coast marine ecosystem could be catastrophic.

(Ed. note: While billing itself as a Farm and Country Journal, Rural Delivery is also a good source for a wide range of information including environmental problems. Especially of interest have been their numerous articles on forestry in the past few years. If you would like to subscribe or receive a free copy, you can write to Rural Delivery, P.O. Box 1509, Liverpool, Nova Scotia BOT 1K0.)

