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 **As ocean pollution mounts, "toxic slime" rises up, destroying ocean life**  
Tuesday, August 01, 2006 by: NewsTarget  
Tags: ocean pollution, life sciences, ocean ecosystems

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(NewsTarget) The pollution of the world's oceans is extracting a price from ocean life and human life -- scientists say a dangerous "toxic slime" is rising up from the depths.

One such symptom is a mutated strain of a 2.7-billion-year-old cyanobacteria known as fireweed, which has stricken Moreton Bay fishermen with searing welts, and caused difficulty breathing when accidentally inhaled.

When fishermen reported the substance, it was dismissed until a sample made it to the University of Queensland. While in a drying oven, the sample released fumes toxic enough to send professors and students gasping for air.

"We know the human factor is responsible (for fireweed). We just have to figure out what it is," said William Dennison, former director of the University of Queensland botany lab.

While the ocean was long thought to be immune to humanity's influence, accumulated environmental influences -- such as over-fishing and runoff from pollutants -- have now altered the basic chemistry of the oceans and made them more supportive to primitive life. Harmful algae, similar to fireweed, have shown up off the coast of Sweden, on the Southern coast of Maui, on Florida's Gulf Coast and north of Venice. The Spanish coast is also overcrowded with jellyfish.

Advanced oceanic life forms are struggling for survival while primitive life forms -- such as algae, bacteria and jellyfish -- are starting to spread unchecked. This regression of evolution is "the rise of slime," according to Jeremy B.C. Jackson, a marine ecologist and paleontologist at Scripps Institution of Oceanography in La Jolla, Calif.

Over-fishing has started an evolutionary regression that has spun into a vicious circle. There has been a dramatic reduction in the numbers of turtles that prey on jellyfish and an overabundance of the plankton they love to eat, and this has led some fishermen to become jellyfishermen.

"Easy money," said former shrimp fisherman Grovea Simpson of the creatures. "They get so thick you can walk on them."

Simpson cannot scrape together enough of his original catch to make a living anymore, so he catches great hauls of jellyfish, which are then shipped to China and Japan, where they are delicacies.

The historic fishing industry of California has also taken a dramatic turn. Three of the top five commercial catches are not [fish](#), but squid, crab and sea urchins, and the still-surgeing numbers of jellyfish may catapult them to Western plates sooner rather than later.

University of British Columbia fisheries Scientist Daniel Pauly fears that one day "My kids will tell their children: Eat your jellyfish."

Perhaps the biggest casualties of humanity's lifestyle side effects are the coral reefs. Although they only cover 1 percent of the oceans' floors, they support nearly 25 percent of all [ocean](#) life.

Marine ecologist Brian Lapointe has been studying the effects of algae on a coral reef at Looe Key, Fl. When he recalls seeing the eroded reef -- starved of life-giving sunlight by the algae canopy, and purged of [life](#) by suffocating bacteria that thrives on sewage -- he likens it to coming home to find one's house ransacked by burglars.

"It rips my heart out," he says.

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