
The Water's Fine!

Or is it? With the budget ax hovering, we might never know.

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Published on April 24, 2008

News

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On Saturday, April 12, in the name of journalism, science, and the American way — and a \$75 gift card — Riptide donned a pair of flip-flops and prepared for the worst: to be submerged, head to toe, in human feces.

Well, almost. As part of a scientific water study at Hobie Beach, Riptide was actually assigned to be in the control group, which meant sitting under a little plastic canopy and reading a magazine for 15 minutes. We still got the 75 bucks. The experimental group, meanwhile, stood clustered together in the water about 50 feet from shore, looking like a sheepish bunch of flamingos — only fatter.

The University of Miami Rosenstiel School of Marine Biology as well as the Miami-Dade County and Florida health departments are conducting the study. It aims to determine the threat level of bacteria and fecal coliform to humans who swim at the popular destination off the Rickenbacker Causeway, known to locals as the one area beach where you don't have to leave your car far behind to take a dip — the American dream at its finest.

In 2007, about 10 percent of the 52 samples taken at Hobie Beach were found to be below federal health standards for the microbes, which are not actual human waste but are associated with its presence. Waterborne feces can cause eye infections, rashes, diarrhea, and stomach illness.

Samir Elmir, environmental health director at the county health department, emphasizes he is not aware of anyone ever getting sick from swimming at any area beach. In fact, he points out, Miami has some of the cleanest beaches anywhere in

the nation. "They're fine, they're clean," says Elmir. "But sometimes, when you sample using those indicators, you may exceed the recommended standards."

One reason for the study, he says, is to see whether the threshold might actually be too low. Current EPA standards are based on studies that have been performed in colder climates. But researchers think it's possible that indicator microbes in warmer climates can grow independently of the pollution they're supposed to be indicating.

In other words, no s**t.

Still, not everyone is quite so optimistic about the quality of water at Hobie and other area beaches. "I know there have been people with eye infections, sinus infections, rashes," says Erica D'Avanzo, Florida regional director for the National Surfrider Foundation, a beach watchdog group. Part of the problem, D'Avanzo says, is the health department lacks a mechanism to track whether people are getting sick from the water. "It's pretty much a common occurrence," she says. "And being that people are in the water all the time, we happen to feel it more than most."

Both Elmir and D'Avanzo agree on one thing: More testing is needed. Unfortunately, penny-pinching lawmakers in Tallahassee are coming to a different conclusion: The state House of Representatives is considering cutting water testing from the budget entirely; the Senate is deliberating whether to make cuts as well, though less drastic.

That, says D'Avanzo, is just plain stupid. "Think about it this way," she points out. "It's going to impact our tourism if everybody is getting sick."