

---

#Creekshed: Creekshed Narratives

Creekshed Collection

---

9-23-2021

## #Creekshed - "New 'Creekshed Project' Will Look for the Headwaters of Tampa Bay's Polluted Gulf

Thomas B. Hallock  
*U South Florida St. Petersburg, thallock@usf.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/creekshed>

---

### Scholar Commons Citation

Hallock, Thomas B., "#Creekshed - 'New 'Creekshed Project' Will Look for the Headwaters of Tampa Bay's Polluted Gulf" (2021). *#Creekshed: Creekshed Narratives*. 1.  
<https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/creekshed/1>

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Creekshed Collection at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in #Creekshed: Creekshed Narratives by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@usf.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@usf.edu).



# New 'Creekshed Project' will look for the headwaters of Tampa Bay's polluted gulf

Tracing tributaries helps us see how we have engineered growing crises

By [Thomas Hallock](#)



*StPeteFL/Facebook*

'A goliath grouper should not be washing up along a city park.'

A Goliath grouper washed up along Lassing Park, just south of downtown St. Pete. My wife Julie was walking the dog and thought the enormous fish was a dead manatee. We went back to check it out. City sanitation workers were already on the scene, snapping photos and wondering how they would

haul this enormous carcass (adults can reach to 800 pounds) over the beachhead. None of this felt natural.

*Karenia brevis*, or red tide, had churned up the west coast of Florida, starting from Charlotte Harbor, as it typically does, where the Caloosahatchee feeds its filth from Lake Okeechobee into the Gulf of Mexico. *K. brevis* occurs naturally; these tiny dinoflagellates (one-cell organisms with a whip-like tail) bloom 10-40 miles offshore. The trouble then comes closer to land. Because humans have juiced up our estuaries with sewage dumps, grass clippings, agricultural and road run-off, the blooms intensify.

Add to these indignities the spill at Piney Point, which coupled with a dry early summer ratcheting (up salinity in estuarine waters), drew *Karenia brevis* into Tampa Bay for a fish kill beyond any in recent memory.

Again, this is not natural.

Try to imagine the end of the Goliath grouper that washed up along Lassing Park. The very name, *Epinephelus itajara*, reminds me of Big Bird's imaginary friend, Mr. Snuffleupagus.

This protected and hermaphroditic, refrigerator-sized cousin of the Chilean sea bass likes deep water. The bay is too shallow. As red tide moved in, releasing a nasty neurotoxin, the grouper followed shipping lanes carved into Tampa Bay. A quick glance at nautical charts suggests a route up the St. Pete harbor channel. Somewhere south of downtown, the fish lost control of its fins, started swimming in circles and vomiting, then the gills shut down—causing death by suffocation. A tide then washed the bloated carcass over the sand bar off Lassing Park, where my wife mistook it for a manatee.

Over the month of July sanitation and parks workers collected dead marine life that was reported in the *thousands* of tons. Exact numbers vary. City Council was told 1,200 tons; a source from the inside reported 1,600 to me.

The magnitude of loss should get us thinking.



As the kill peaked along the bay, I did my small part. I walked the thin strand of eroding beach at Lassing

As the kill peaked along the bay, I did my small part. I walked the thin strand of eroding beach at Lassing, gathering enough varieties of marine life to rival an aquarium. Along with my bucket and grabber, I carried my phone, my notebook, and a pen to catalogue the cost of this self-inflicted catastrophe.

Puffers, cowfish and bottom-feeding cats took the worst hit. I found reds, horseshoe crabs, alewives, toadfish, pinfish, sheepshead, snapper, catfish, a cownose ray swarmed in blowflies, and snook.

I picked up the fish, noted the species in my journal, and snapped a photo. I joked that after 20 years living by the bay, I had finally snagged a snook!

American eels were a big question mark. Friends remarked they had never seen so many. Eels live most of their lives in freshwater, in rivers and even springs, but a little bit of research suggests they were in migration from their spawning grounds in the Sargasso Sea.

The mind reels. Eels do not belong off Lassing Park.





Thomas Hallock

The mind reels. Eels do not belong off Lassing Park.

Looking for perspective, I turned to my environmentalist friends. I asked historian Jack Davis, a Pinellas native who won a Pulitzer for his history, "The Gulf."

"Please don't call these events red tide," Davis wrote me; "that's like calling a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich a bread sandwich." By blaming fish kills on *Karenia brevis*, we let policy makers off the hook, when the Gulf is dying from human activity—not only spills, but sewage, lawn and roadway runoff. "Call these events what they are," Davis writes, "human tide."

How can we put this unnecessary loss in perspective?

To honor the grouper, and this summer's continuing bloom, I've decided to launch my own creekshed project. (My "City Wilds" colleague, Amanda Hagood, will offer occasional dispatches of her own.) My plan is to trace the waters that feed into Bayboro Harbor and Tampa Bay, off south St. Pete. Imagine a reverse letter "C" over the lower part of the Pinellas Peninsula, with the Booker and Salt Creeks conjoined like Siamese twins by USF St. Pete.

Start at the headwaters of Booker Creek—somewhere in the North 30s (Avenue and Street). Under city parks, linked by sewers, lie the remnants of a creek's headwaters. I'll follow the stream into the city's history, beneath the Interstate, past Tropicana Field and African-American neighborhoods that were razed in the name of urban renewal, through leafy Roser Park, and into Bayboro Harbor.

I will travel by kayak and through research archives.

From Bayboro Harbor, I will switch course and paddle up Salt Creek—through the Bartlett Park and Harbordale neighborhoods, into Lake Maggiore (a tidal estuary that the city insists on managing as fresh), to the sandy spine underneath Interstate 275, where the creek has its source and where a gas station is now being built. From the west side of 34th Street, I will trace the outer reaches of Clam Bayou to the dredged channel off the Gulfport marina.

Over the next two years or so, I plan to dispatch a column every other month, following this path. Again, I'll get some help. So why do this?



*Julie Armstrong*



Try to imagine the end of the Goliath grouper that washed up along Lassing Park in St. Petersburg, Florida. The very name, *Epinephelus itajara*, reminds me of Big Bird's imaginary friend, Mr. Snuffleupagus.



Maybe the grouper was a wake-up call. Every indication shows Tampa Bay to be on the front edge of climate change. None of this is speculation. Or hysteria. Tampa Bay residents sit on a front line of the Anthropocene, the new geologic age, named for our own species. Boundaries between land or water (the "littoral") will shift. Urbanized creeks mark this line between human and nature—or what my geographer friend Tony Abbott calls the "literal littoral."

A goliath grouper should not be washing up along a city park.

Our current crises are a product of how we choose to live. Following a creekshed helps us see how we have engineered growing crises.

As for the last fish kill in Tampa Bay, yeah, blame Piney Point. And yes, we all know, *Karenia brevis* bloomed long before people started trashing the Gulf. But it's time to take stock of our role in shaping the natural world.

My local vigil at Lassing Park ended after a week. *K. brevis* moved up the coast and the city collected the bulk of the dead fish. Human life returned. A person practiced yoga; someone else read under the shade of the palm. The city, overwhelmed by the clean up, had fallen behind on mowing cycles. Residents near Lassing Park like their clear, unobstructed view of Tampa Bay. Instead of mangroves and oyster beds, neighbors clamor for a mowed lawn. *Sigh.*

On the morning I stumbled onto the foul-smelling ray, grass clipping bunched along the water's edge. The next big rain or tide would send the nitrogen-rich waste straight into Tampa Bay, feeding algae and compromising the water's health.

This has got to stop. It will not stop. But as our streams run into the sea, in short time becoming the sea, at least we can chronicle the course.

*Next stop for Thomas Hallock's "City Wilds": finding the headwaters of Booker Creek.*

*Send anonymous news tips to [cltampabay\\_tips@protonmail.com](mailto:cltampabay_tips@protonmail.com). Support local journalism in these crazy days. Our small but mighty team works tirelessly to bring you news on how coronavirus is affecting Tampa and surrounding areas. Please consider making a one time or monthly donation to help support our staff. Every little bit helps.*



*Subscribe to our newsletter and follow [@cl\\_tampabay](#) on Twitter.*

© 2022 Creative Loafing Tampa Bay

Powered by **Foundation**

