



AUSMEPA MEDIA RELEASE

This media release is issued by the Australian Marine Environment Protection Association (AUSMEPA)

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Deadly Seaweed in Europe Could Be Just a Warning to Australians

In response to concerns being raised about reports from France and the UK about poisonous seaweed on beaches causing the death of one person and others falling ill, a spokesperson for the Australian Marine Environment Protection Association (AUSMEPA) said today, that at this stage there is no evidence that beaches in Australia will have the same problem

Sea Lettuce, a common seaweed, is often seen washed up on Australian beaches. Alive it looks like green lettuce attached to rocks or bedded into sand or mud. The AUSMEPA spokesperson said nobody imagined that it had the potential to kill people. To endanger people it would have to be washed up onto the beach in vast quantities.

Once on the beach the bright green seaweed starts to rot. It turns white. A small piece of dead sea lettuce looks like a thrown away tissue. However in massive quantities it transforms into a solid white crust. Hydrogen sulphide a potentially deadly gas can build up underneath. It is when the crust is broken, the hydrogen sulphide is released. It smells of rotten eggs and if the concentration is high enough, the gas can be lethal. When Sea Lettuce rots in the sea at the start of autumn it turns black.

Sea Lettuce has become an increasing problem in the northern hemisphere. It grows in shallow water that has weak wave action. When the Sea Lettuce grows in vast mats, they kill all the sea creatures around them in the sand, mud and water. They seem to be toxic enough to prevent most animals from eating them. It is well known that when they rot in the sea, they produce hydrogen sulphide. Sea Lettuce needs high levels of nutrients such as nitrates. When the nitrates are high they can outgrow other species of seaweed.

That is what we do know!

So how has a common type of seaweed that we walk over many times at the beach suddenly have the potential to become deadly? The first culprit that is being blamed is the nitrogen from fertiliser that is washed from farms into the sea.

AUSMEPA hopes that the seaweed episode in Europe is just a warning of how our seas and oceans are responding to the environmental damage caused by human activities. It is imperative that we fully understand the cause of this poisonous outbreak. We look to the authorities in France and the UK to investigate this incident and provide information to the rest of the world.

The AUSMEPA spokesperson said the cause is more likely to be a combination of changes to the sea, just not fertilisers. Apart from fertilisers what other possible causes need to be investigated by the authorities

- Has climate change and the increase in sea temperatures played a role?
- Why has so much sea lettuce been washed up? Is it due to more storms that again may be influenced by climate change?
- Were there once shellfish or other animals that fed on the sea lettuce and have been killed off by other causes such as pollution or the accidental introduction of feral predators?

Might we face the same problem in Australia?

The AUSMEPA spokesperson said this is a warning sign to all that love visiting the beach and recommends that if anyone ever sees a vast mat of many square metres of dead crusty white algae, they should not break the surface, stay well away and contact their local council.

Information about AUSMEPA, which aims to make Australians more aware of our marine environment and the importance of its protection, is available at

www.ausmepa.org.au