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Mysterious Manatee and Dolphin Deaths in Florida Confound Scientists

- By [Nadia Drake](#)
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Once a lush and healthy estuary, the Indian River Lagoon is now an enigmatic death trap. Running along 40 percent of Florida's Atlantic coast, the lagoon's brackish waters harbor a mysterious killer that has claimed the lives of hundreds of manatees, pelicans, and dolphins.



Manatees aggregate near warm-water sources; cold snaps, like in the winter of 2010-2011, can kill hundreds of the animals.

Photo: Ann Spellman

And there are other signs that the Indian River Lagoon is in distress: As of March 21, 200 dead brown pelicans have been found there this year, emaciated and infested with parasites. But right now, Baxter says, there's no evidence that pelican and manatee mortality are linked.

It's possible that something in the lagoon is affecting dolphins as well. [Megan Stolen](#), a research scientist with Hubbs-SeaWorld Research Institute, says teams in the area have recovered a slightly higher-than-normal number of deceased dolphins – four in January, five in February, three so far in March. “A number of them have been emaciated,” she said. “They're really thin, skinny, and starvation mode.”

But there's no lack of fish in the lagoon. “It's not that they're starving because there's no fish. If they're starving it's because they can't find food, can't chase the food, can't metabolize it,” she said.

So far, though, the numbers aren't statistically significant – averages for those months are between two and three dolphin deaths — and again, there's no obvious connection to the manatees' demise. “I would say we're on alert,” she said. “But right now, there's not a reason to be worried.”

What does worry scientists is that there's no way of knowing when the manatee die-offs in the lagoon will end – or when they'll know what's going on.

“That's probably one of the most disturbing things,” Spellman said. “If this were a cold snap, we'd know. Right now, we don't even know what to look for. They're not even showing any outward signs. We have no idea when this will end. “

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