

Q & A: Stuart DeCew with the Sierra Club

Editor's Note: Stuart DeCew is the Regional Representative for Sierra Club and the coordinator of the Sierra Club's Red Tide and Coastal Pollution Campaign, which works with community groups, scientists, and administrative decision-makers at the state and local level to target and reduce the major sources of nutrient pollution flowing into the Gulf of Mexico from fertilizers, storm water runoff, septic tanks, and sewage discharges.



Photo by Holli Bonito

What caused you to get involved with the Sierra Club?

I grew up playing around outdoors. My family vacations were hiking, canoeing, and fishing trips, and during that time, I developed a profound respect and appreciation for the natural world. That underlying connection with the places in the world where you can't hear a honking car but you can watch a fish rise as the sun comes up is what still drives me. I stayed interested in environmental issues throughout my studies, focusing my research in college on water management in the American West. When I worked in Congress as a legislative aide, I admired the measured and deliberate advocacy of the Sierra Club in Washington. I find that the organization is still grounded in the common-sense positions that Sierra Club's John Muir instilled in the conservation movement when he collaborated with Teddy Roosevelt to establish the national parks system.

Why are you so passionate about the water quality and vitality of the Gulf of Mexico?

My grandparents and great-grandparents lived along the Gulf Coast for many years. It was their home, and they cared for it deeply. My initial motivation to protect this area comes from an established sense of place. In the course of the past two years of working on this campaign, it has developed into something larger than that. I have met hundreds of people who have shared their personal and financial stories on why a healthy Gulf of Mexico is so important to them... Fishermen, realtors, beach bums, longtime residents, and recent transplants talking about their desire to protect their homes and their families. The Gulf of Mexico is a place where some people go to find peace and some people go to make a living, but it fundamentally is what sustains the state of Florida.

What do you believe is the most pressing threat to the health of Florida's waterways and coastline?

The most immediate threat that we face along Florida's coastline is the excess amount of pollution, increasing amounts of nitrogen and phosphorus, that we are dumping into our waterways on a daily basis. Right now, there is a growing sense of urgency on this issue, following warnings at the national and international level on the devastating effects of nutrient pollution or eutrophication on the coastal environment and the coastal economy.

Do you believe state and local government and private industry are doing enough to protect the quality of our Florida waters?

Change comes slowly to both government and business, unless the voter and the consumer both demand a better product. Some local governments and businesses in our area have begun to respond to citizens' concerns in a meaningful way. The state and federal government have been slower to act. In the case of Sarasota, there is growing partnership between green local businesses and government entities. However, on both the federal and the state level in recent years, common-sense environmental leadership is something we have been sorely lacking. Panels of scientific experts have issued stark warning to the federal and state governments to act in the past seven years, and little has been done. Recent moves by the governor's office to address the imminent dangers of climate change portend to better days ahead for environmental management, but it remains to be seen if that will also translate to better policies.

Sarasota County recently passed a landmark fertilizer ordinance to reduce the improper and excessive use of fertilizers. How significant is this development, and why?

The Sarasota County commission, with the support of a broad coalition of organizations and businesses from across the county, stood up for both a better business model for landscape maintenance companies and, more importantly, for the long-term health of the residents of Sarasota County. The passage of this ordinance is not just a testament to how government should work, but also to how our elected officials should respond. The commissioners put the greater good of the community ahead of special interests and have effectively helped to shape the debate about the excessive use of fertilizer. Their actions forced the state of Florida to finally start asking some of the right questions. Whether the interests of the community will be as well represented at the state level as they were by the Sarasota County Commission remains to be seen.

Many of us have read about the dead zones off the coast of Louisiana and the southwest coast of Florida. How has this impacted the conversation about protecting and preserving the Gulf of Mexico?

People need to close their eyes and imagine two areas – one larger than the state of New Jersey, the other larger than the state of Rhode Island – and picture them completely lifeless. Imagine walking or biking through something of that size which is completely void of life. A major issue we face as a nation is that if we can't see it, we don't think it's real, and all this damage is unfolding below the surface. I do feel that there is a growing awareness and shock associated with news of these dead zones. Sensible people recognize that we have critically damaged what was once the most productive fishery in the world by mismanagement and wasting resources. We need practical people from all sectors of society to set up and demand more comprehensive protections for our water quality in all the areas that drain to the Gulf of Mexico. It does us no good as a nation to continue wasteful farm subsidies which promote the cultivation of inefficient biofuels and overuse of chemical fertilizers which ultimately destroy the economic and environmental jewel that is the Gulf of Mexico.

What can businesses and consumers do to help our environment?

Consumers are continuing to vote with their dollars every day, and smart businesses are already adapting to a shift in spending patterns that is trending toward environmentally friendly products, whether it is a minimal amount of controlled or timed release fertilizer for your yard, melaleuca mulch instead of cypress mulch for your landscape, or an energy-efficient light bulb. Businesses that understand that their long-term financial success depends on the long-term health and vitality of the community are the ones that consumers need to support. By becoming a green-certified business, retrofitting your office or your home to become more energy efficient, using natural cleaning products in your home and office, recycling, or just by taking a reusable bag to the grocery store, businesses and consumers can work in partnership to fundamentally alter many of the out-of-date purchasing habits that currently exist.

Who has been leading the effort to promote water quality in the Gulf in our region?

Charter Boat Captain Wayne Genthner, who discovered the dead zone in 2005 off of our coast, has made it a personal mission to protect a place which he calls his backyard, church, and livelihood. Ed Chiles with Solutions to Avoid Red Tide (START) has changed the lexicon on how government and researchers approach managing our coastal resources. Don Chaney, the founder of the Healthy Gulf Coalition and the Conservation Chair of the local Sierra Club group, has dedicated every free moment to cleaning up the water for his children and grandchildren. Ed Rosenthal, CEO of Florikan, has also been a tireless advocate and an industry leader in promoting a more sustainable and consumer-friendly business model for fertilizer and landscape maintenance. Finally, local governments have committed significant time and resources to this effort; Commissioner John Thaxton, in particular, has made protecting and enhancing the natural resources of this area a lifelong goal. We need more people to speak up for their community.

How do you feel about the future of environmental management in our region?

I feel that there is an underlying shift in the mentality of people in the area. People are beginning to realize the consequences of our actions. Regular folks from around the state now recognize that the well-being of their families, the health of the economy, and their quality of life are directly linked to the health of our environment. This increased understanding will demand the intelligent management of our natural resources. Our shared task

as a community has to be to translate that shift in mentality to a fundamental change in policies. We need to be deliberate and inclusive, but we need to act quickly. What lies in our path are dated business models wedded to a distant past and government bureaucracy which only seems to respond when we reach the point of crisis. If we as a community can effectively change the course of these two institutions – the need to adapt or get out of the way in the case of polluting businesses and the need to perform their function and actually protect the common good in the case of regulators – I am positive about the future of environmental management. If we can't accomplish that key cultural shift in the competency of our government and the environmental ethic of business, we are going to have trouble.

What are specific actions you would like to see taken by our next president that would have the greatest impact on the health of our environment?

First and foremost, our next president needs to challenge us. Our country, from the time of de Touqueville's journey to today, has been defined by our exceptionalism – the belief that anything is possible because we are capable and dedicated enough to shape and change our world. We rise to meet today's challenges, not shy away from responsibility. Almost a half century ago, we set about going to the moon, and we accomplished our goal because we tapped into the creativity and talent of our nation, harnessed that ingenuity, and were willing to make the proper sacrifices to accomplish our goals. We need to become the world leader for addressing climate change and set our industries on a course to change the way we produce and distribute energy. The next president needs to challenge us to figuratively "go to the moon" with energy production and environmental management in the next 10 years. **PC**

