The Smell Of Hopelessness

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THE SMELL OF HOPELESSNESS

Virginie Mark, 65, lives in the island of Martinique and is trying to survive. She struggles with her health, finances and psychology because some decaying algae has never been removed in front of her house. Although her house once looked like a paradise, Virginie feels like she lives trapped in a grave. She often goes to the doctor complaining about stomach pains, nausea or eye irritation. She experiences strange things such as her son’s car starting by itself.

Rafts of sargassum seaweed, as much as 300 miles wide, began invading the Caribbean in 2011. In 2016, the problem has reached a crisis: tons of seaweed now stretch from Texas, Galveston to northern Brazil, with the Lesser Antilles suffering the most damage. People who live near beaches are exposed to an insidious and pernicious danger, scientists say. On shore, under the sun, the algae rots and creates hydrogen sulfide gas, which emits a noxious odor similar to that of rotten eggs.

The gas irritates eyes and throats, and can trigger asthma and nausea. Scientists differ on the level of the health impact. They are unsure of the exact reason for the seaweed invasion. Some hypothesis attribute it to warmer oceans due to climate change. Others attribute it to higher levels of chemicals from pesticides in the water. Chemicals used in agriculture stream through the Amazon River in Brazil then get into the warm waters of the Atlantic, provoking an abnormal algal boom. Being exposed to high levels of gas emission can also be deadly.

The odor of the rotten seaweed also drives tourists away from beaches and restaurants, and the tourism economy is collapsing.

Marlene Rosambert leaves near the beach in Francois, one of Martinique’s most stricken cities. She says it ruins her life to wake up to that smell every day for the last four years, even if the invasions are cyclic. Her eyes, ears and nose are scratchy but she is even more worried because scientists are unable to inform people about the level of toxicity of the gas.

They do not know the consequences on the lungs in ten years from now. Once every week, Marlene has to clean her pipes because the gas emitted by the seaweed corrodes her household appliances; so she wonders what consequence the fumes could have on her organs. Marlene had to change her T.V set, microwave and computer many times. Hundreds of seaside residents like her have lost countless thousands of dollars’ worth of televisions, computers and other appliances.

The seaweed phenomenon also takes a toll on local businesses, as few clients can stand the noxious odors. Fishes suffocate underneath thick mats of algae and the fishing industry is struggling.
Some seaside residents say their government took too long to clear the beaches. As the story unfolds, we understand that Virginie feels hopeless in front of a situation she can’t change.