

THE MYSTERY OF THE TEXAS FLOWER GARDEN'S BLEACHING

In the summer of 2016, a group of recreational scuba divers visited the Gulf of Mexico to explore the beautiful coral reefs known to populate its national marine sanctuary, the Flower Garden Banks. The divers came to the reef expecting to see vibrant colors of the Texan corals. However, what they found instead was a shocking discovery: the east bank was filled with dead corals and organisms covered in white bacterial blankets. The condition was later known as coral bleaching.

The bleaching at the Flower Garden Banks was unlike anything sanctuary researchers had ever witnessed. Sanctuary staff quickly alerted scientists around the world about the discovery. The bleaching was especially puzzling because coral reefs at the Flower Garden Banks were typically found to be some of the healthiest in the world. Spurred by concern, an intensive investigation began to find the culprit of the bleaching.

Within days, the sanctuary conducted several assessment dives to better understand what was going on. The sanctuary made two observations. First, the bleaching affected approximately 6.5 acres of the Garden's east bank. Of that bank, 80% of the corals were affected by the bleaching. Second, it was clear that this type of damage wasn't caused by an oil spill or ship traffic. So, the mystery remained: what caused the bleaching event at the Flower Garden Banks?

Scientists had one clue: not long before the bleaching occurred, heavy rainfall and a widespread flood took place along the coast. As a result, much of that water washed into the Gulf of Mexico.

Adapted from Texas General Land Office. (2019, June 21). The Mystery Remaining at Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary. Retrieved July 22, 2022, from <https://txglo.medium.com/the-mystery-remaining-at-flower-garden-banks-national-marine-sanctuary-1430e9374679>