

Public Perceptions of Florida Red Tide Risks

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This research integrates theoretical frameworks of risk perception, social amplification of risk, and the role of place-specific contexts in order to explore the various perceptions surrounding Florida red tides. Florida red tides are naturally occurring events that are increasing in frequency, duration, and severity. This has implications for public health, the local economy, and ecosystem health. While many of the negative impacts of Florida red tides are not easily controlled, some of the secondary impacts may be mitigated through individuals' responses. However, public perception and consequent reactions to Florida red tides have not been investigated. This research uses questionnaire surveys, and semi-structured interviews, to explore the various perceptions of the risk surrounding red tides. Surveys and interviews were conducted along two Florida west coast beaches. The results indicate that the underlying foundations of the social amplification of the risk framework are applicable to understanding how individuals form perceptions of risk relative to red tide events. There are key differences between the spatial locations of individuals and corresponding perceptions, indicating that place-specific contexts are essential to understanding how individuals receive and interpret risk information. The results also suggest that individuals may be lacking efficient and up-to-date information about Florida red tides and their impacts because of inconsistent public outreach. Overall, social and spatial factors appear to be influential as to whether individuals amplify or attenuate the risks associated with Florida red tides.

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