Hot and fresh: Pervasive climate stressors of seagrass in a large Gulf coast estuary

Marcus W Beck1,✉

1 Tampa Bay Estuary Program, St. Petersburg, Florida 33701 USA 16802 USA

✉ Correspondence: [Marcus W Beck <mbeck@tbep.org>](mailto:mbeck@tbep.org)

## Abstract

## 1 Introduction

Focus on two time periods: full record and recent decline

Focus on two physical parameters: temperature and salinity

Temp background for TB: NOAA coastwatch trends

## 2 Methods

Seagrass changes over time in [Figure 1](#fig-seagrasschg).

Observed trends aggregated by year and bay segment across stations and months in [Figure 2](#fig-saltempraw).

The conceptual stressor diagram [Figure 3](#fig-concept).

Salinity tolerance: Ruppia > Halodule> Thalassia > Syringodium

Halodule:

* Temp: 20-30 (range, Lewis III et al. (1985))
* Salinity: grows well in most salinity ranges (Lirman and Cropper 2003), like Syringodium but more tolerant (Lewis III et al. 1985), 10-35 (range) or < 10 (S. Scolaro)

Thalassia:

* Temp: 20-30 (range, Lewis III et al. (1985), Zieman (1975)), 30-31 (upper, from SS)
* Salinity: 25 (lower, Lewis III et al. (1985)); 30, lowest at 5 (lower, Lirman and Cropper (2003)), 33-38 (range, Phillips (1960)); 24-35 (range, Zieman (1975) citing Phillips (1960)); 15 (SS)

Syringodium:

* Temp: 20-30 (range, Lewis III et al. (1985)), 29 (upper from SS)
* Salinity: 20 (lower, Lewis III et al. (1985)), 25 (lower, Lirman and Cropper (2003)); 20

Lewis III et al. (1985) review of seagrass in Tampa Bay. Lirman and Cropper (2003) conducted exposure experiments to evaluate seagrass growth in response to a range of salinity conditions. McMillan and Moseley (1967) discusses growth of halodule, syringodium, thalassia, and ruppia in response to salinity increases (up to 75 psu), no info on lower limit. Cites Phillips (1960) for a salinity range of Thalassia in Florida of 33 - 38 psu. Zieman (1975) discusses seasonal variation of thalassia relative to temp and salinity

* Get FIM, Pinellas, Manatee data

## 3 Results

For [Figure 2](#fig-saltempraw), salinity shows much higher inter-annual variability, but lower intra-year variation among stations. Trends are similar for bottom vs top, temperature shows stronger trend than salinity.

Kendall test results are shown in [Figure 4](#fig-kendall).

An example of mixed effects models for two selected thresholds is shown in [Figure 5](#fig-mixeff).

## 4 Discussion

Other areas showing seagrass loss - Florida Bay is different, less water flowing out of everglad and compounding SLR has elevated salinity and likely stress in other direction. Also, Biscayne Bay and IRL is a lot like OTB, poor flushing for example.

## Acknowledgments

## Figures

|  |
| --- |
| Figure 1: Seagrass changes over time in Tampa Bay for (a) areal coverage and (b) frequency occurrence of major species. Changes are shown for major bay segments. Note the different time scale between (a) and (b). Coverage maps in (a) began in 1988 and seagrass transect monitoring in (b) began in 1998. Red lines in (a) show approximate capacity of seagrass coverage based on the baywide target of 40,000 acres. OTB: Old Tampa Bay, HB: Hillsborough Bay, MTB: Middle Tampa Bay, LTB: Lower Tampa Bay. |

|  |
| --- |
| Figure 2: Long-term salinity and temperature trends for major bay segments from 1975 to 2022. Points are colored by sampling location in the water column. Points show the average and 95% confidence interval across all stations and sampling months for each year in each bay segment. OTB: Old Tampa Bay, HB: Hillsborough Bay, MTB: Middle Tampa Bay, LTB: Lower Tampa Bay. |

|  |
| --- |
| Figure 3: Conceptual stressor diagram |

|  |
| --- |
| Figure 4: Trends from 1974 to 2022 for salinity and temperature measurements at long-term monitoring stations in Tampa Bay. Results for (a) seasonal Kendall tests by station and monitoring location (top or bottom of the waer column) are shown in (a) with color and shape corresponding to the estimated annual slope as change per year (yr-1). Summarized seasonal trends by month are shown for (b) top and (c) bottom measurements as the percent of stations in each bay segment with significant decreasing (salinity) or increasing (temperature) trends. Bay segment outlines are shown in (a); OTB (northwest): Old Tampa Bay, HB (northeast): Hillsborough Bay, MTB: Middle Tampa Bay, LTB: Lower Tampa Bay. |

|  |
| --- |
| Figure 5: Example of mixed effects models for the estimated number of days by year that salinity (blue) or temperature (red) were below or above thresholds of 25 psu and 30 degrees C, respectively. The bottom row (black) shows the number of days when both salinity and temperature were below or above the thresholds. The models included station as a random effect for each bay segment, with grey lines indicating individual station trends and thicker lines indicating the overall model fit. Slopes for significant models are shown in the bottom right of each facet. OTB: Old Tampa Bay, HB: Hillsborough Bay, MTB: Middle Tampa Bay, LTB: Lower Tampa Bay. |

## Tables

Summary of mixed-effects models evaluating increases in the number of days each year from 1974 to 2022 when salinity or temperature was below or above critical thresholds, respectively. The slope estimates in the “Both” column indicate trends in the number of days when both salinity and temperature were below or above critical thresholds. \*\* p < 0.005, \* p < 0.05, - no model. OTB (northwest): Old Tampa Bay, HB (northeast): Hillsborough Bay, MTB: Middle Tampa Bay, LTB: Lower Tampa Bay.

|  | Thresholds | | Slopes | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Bay Segment | Salinity | Temperature | Salinity | Temperature | Both |
| OTB |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | 15 | 29 | 0.06 | 1.42\*\* | 0.02 |
|  | 15 | 30 | 0.06 | 1.04\*\* | -0.01 |
|  | 15 | 31 | 0.06 | 0.12\* | -0.01 |
|  | 20 | 29 | 1.06\*\* | 1.42\*\* | 0.5\*\* |
|  | 20 | 30 | 1.06\*\* | 1.04\*\* | 0.16\*\* |
|  | 20 | 31 | 1.06\*\* | 0.12\* | -0.02 |
|  | 25 | 29 | 2.59\*\* | 1.42\*\* | 1.44\*\* |
|  | 25 | 30 | 2.59\*\* | 1.04\*\* | 0.81\*\* |
|  | 25 | 31 | 2.59\*\* | 0.12\* | 0.07 |
| HB |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | 15 | 29 | 0.06 | 1.23\*\* | 0.04\* |
|  | 15 | 30 | 0.06 | 1.01\*\* | 0.02\* |
|  | 15 | 31 | 0.06 | 0.17\*\* | - |
|  | 20 | 29 | 0.5\*\* | 1.23\*\* | 0.47\*\* |
|  | 20 | 30 | 0.5\*\* | 1.01\*\* | 0.23\*\* |
|  | 20 | 31 | 0.5\*\* | 0.17\*\* | - |
|  | 25 | 29 | 1.35\*\* | 1.23\*\* | 1.23\*\* |
|  | 25 | 30 | 1.35\*\* | 1.01\*\* | 0.8\*\* |
|  | 25 | 31 | 1.35\*\* | 0.17\*\* | 0.09\*\* |
| MTB |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | 15 | 29 | -0.01 | 1.29\*\* | - |
|  | 15 | 30 | -0.01 | 1.06\*\* | - |
|  | 15 | 31 | -0.01 | 0.14\*\* | - |
|  | 20 | 29 | 0.04 | 1.29\*\* | 0.08\*\* |
|  | 20 | 30 | 0.04 | 1.06\*\* | 0.02\* |
|  | 20 | 31 | 0.04 | 0.14\*\* | - |
|  | 25 | 29 | 0.97\*\* | 1.29\*\* | 0.74\*\* |
|  | 25 | 30 | 0.97\*\* | 1.06\*\* | 0.38\*\* |
|  | 25 | 31 | 0.97\*\* | 0.14\*\* | 0.03 |
| LTB |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | 15 | 29 | - | 1.08\*\* | - |
|  | 15 | 30 | - | 0.92\*\* | - |
|  | 15 | 31 | - | 0.23\*\* | - |
|  | 20 | 29 | -0.01 | 1.08\*\* | - |
|  | 20 | 30 | -0.01 | 0.92\*\* | - |
|  | 20 | 31 | -0.01 | 0.23\*\* | - |
|  | 25 | 29 | -0.06 | 1.08\*\* | 0.01 |
|  | 25 | 30 | -0.06 | 0.92\*\* | 0 |
|  | 25 | 31 | -0.06 | 0.23\*\* | - |

Number of days at the beginning and end of the period of record when salinity or temperature was below or above critical thresholds, respectively. Values are the estimated mean number of days (plus standard error) from 1974 to 2022. Columns for “Both” indicate the estimated number of days when both salinity and temperature were below or above critical thresholds. Note that not all models are significant (see (table 1)). \*\* p < 0.005, \* p < 0.05, - no model. OTB (northwest): Old Tampa Bay, HB (northeast): Hillsborough Bay, MTB: Middle Tampa Bay, LTB: Lower Tampa Bay.

|  | Thresholds | | Salinity | | Temperature | | Both | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Bay Segment | Salinity | Temperature | Start | End | Start | End | Start | End |
| OTB |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | 15 | 29 | 4 (2.3) | 6 (2.3) | 40 (3.4) | 105 (3.4) | 0 (0.7) | 1 (0.7) |
|  | 15 | 30 | 4 (2.3) | 6 (2.3) | 8 (3.3) | 56 (3.3) | 1 (0.4) | 0 (0.4) |
|  | 15 | 31 | 4 (2.3) | 6 (2.3) | 2 (2.3) | 8 (2.3) | 0 (0.4) | 0 (0.4) |
|  | 20 | 29 | 25 (8.7) | 74 (8.7) | 40 (3.4) | 105 (3.4) | 0 (3) | 23 (3) |
|  | 20 | 30 | 25 (8.7) | 74 (8.7) | 8 (3.3) | 56 (3.3) | 1 (2.2) | 8 (2.2) |
|  | 20 | 31 | 25 (8.7) | 74 (8.7) | 2 (2.3) | 8 (2.3) | 2 (1.4) | 1 (1.4) |
|  | 25 | 29 | 139 (12.9) | 259 (12.9) | 40 (3.4) | 105 (3.4) | 6 (3.9) | 72 (3.9) |
|  | 25 | 30 | 139 (12.9) | 259 (12.9) | 8 (3.3) | 56 (3.3) | 0 (2.8) | 37 (2.7) |
|  | 25 | 31 | 139 (12.9) | 259 (12.9) | 2 (2.3) | 8 (2.3) | 2 (1.9) | 5 (1.9) |
| HB |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | 15 | 29 | 2 (1.8) | 5 (1.7) | 47 (3.8) | 103 (3.7) | 0 (0.7) | 2 (0.7) |
|  | 15 | 30 | 2 (1.8) | 5 (1.7) | 8 (4.9) | 55 (4.8) | 0 (0.3) | 1 (0.3) |
|  | 15 | 31 | 2 (1.8) | 5 (1.7) | -1 (1.4) | 7 (1.4) | - | - |
|  | 20 | 29 | 13 (6) | 36 (5.8) | 47 (3.8) | 103 (3.7) | -2 (2.5) | 20 (2.4) |
|  | 20 | 30 | 13 (6) | 36 (5.8) | 8 (4.9) | 55 (4.8) | -2 (1.3) | 9 (1.2) |
|  | 20 | 31 | 13 (6) | 36 (5.8) | -1 (1.4) | 7 (1.4) | - | - |
|  | 25 | 29 | 139 (12.9) | 201 (12.2) | 47 (3.8) | 103 (3.7) | 12 (3.6) | 68 (3.3) |
|  | 25 | 30 | 139 (12.9) | 201 (12.2) | 8 (4.9) | 55 (4.8) | -2 (2.8) | 35 (2.7) |
|  | 25 | 31 | 139 (12.9) | 201 (12.2) | -1 (1.4) | 7 (1.4) | -1 (0.7) | 4 (0.7) |
| MTB |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | 15 | 29 | 0 (0.2) | 0 (0.2) | 47 (2.7) | 107 (2.7) | - | - |
|  | 15 | 30 | 0 (0.2) | 0 (0.2) | 9 (3.1) | 57 (3.1) | - | - |
|  | 15 | 31 | 0 (0.2) | 0 (0.2) | 0 (0.9) | 6 (0.9) | - | - |
|  | 20 | 29 | 4 (1.8) | 6 (1.8) | 47 (2.7) | 107 (2.7) | 0 (0.6) | 3 (0.6) |
|  | 20 | 30 | 4 (1.8) | 6 (1.8) | 9 (3.1) | 57 (3.1) | 0 (0.3) | 1 (0.3) |
|  | 20 | 31 | 4 (1.8) | 6 (1.8) | 0 (0.9) | 6 (0.9) | - | - |
|  | 25 | 29 | 54 (12.8) | 99 (12.8) | 47 (2.7) | 107 (2.7) | 1 (3.1) | 35 (3.1) |
|  | 25 | 30 | 54 (12.8) | 99 (12.8) | 9 (3.1) | 57 (3.1) | -1 (1.7) | 16 (1.7) |
|  | 25 | 31 | 54 (12.8) | 99 (12.8) | 0 (0.9) | 6 (0.9) | 0 (0.5) | 2 (0.5) |
| LTB |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | 15 | 29 | - | - | 58 (2.8) | 108 (2.8) | - | - |
|  | 15 | 30 | - | - | 21 (3.5) | 63 (3.5) | - | - |
|  | 15 | 31 | - | - | 0 (1.5) | 10 (1.5) | - | - |
|  | 20 | 29 | 0 (0.1) | 0 (0.1) | 58 (2.8) | 108 (2.8) | - | - |
|  | 20 | 30 | 0 (0.1) | 0 (0.1) | 21 (3.5) | 63 (3.5) | - | - |
|  | 20 | 31 | 0 (0.1) | 0 (0.1) | 0 (1.5) | 10 (1.5) | - | - |
|  | 25 | 29 | 4 (1.3) | 1 (1.3) | 58 (2.8) | 108 (2.8) | 0 (0.3) | 1 (0.3) |
|  | 25 | 30 | 4 (1.3) | 1 (1.3) | 21 (3.5) | 63 (3.5) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) |
|  | 25 | 31 | 4 (1.3) | 1 (1.3) | 0 (1.5) | 10 (1.5) | - | - |

## References

Lewis III, Roy R, MJ Durako, MD Moffler, and RC Phillips. 1985. “Seagrass Meadows of Tampa Bay - a Review.” In *Proceedings, Tampa Bay Area Scientific Information Symposium, May 1982*, edited by S. F. Treat, J. L. Simon, R. R. Lewis III, and R. L. Whitman Jr., 210–46. Tampa, Florida: Bellweather Press. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1sNp3FpjdeOjATZ9nDRRAiXEOqQen9W_p/view?usp=sharing>.

Lirman, Diego, and Wendell P. Cropper. 2003. “The Influence of Salinity on Seagrass Growth, Survivorship, and Distribution Within Biscayne Bay, Florida: Field, Experimental, and Modeling Studies.” *Estuaries* 26 (1): 131–41. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf02691700>.

McMillan, Calvin, and Frank N. Moseley. 1967. “Salinity Tolerances of Five Marine Spermatophytes of Redfish Bay, Texas.” *Ecology* 48 (3): 503–6. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1932688>.

Phillips, Ronald C. 1960. *Observations on the Ecology and Distribution of the Florida Seagrasses*. 44. Florida State Board of Conservation, Marine Laboratory.

Zieman, Joseph C. 1975. “Seasonal Variation of Turtle Grass, Thalassia Testudinum König, with Reference to Temperature and Salinity Effects.” *Aquatic Botany* 1 (January): 107–23. <https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-3770(75)90016-9>.