

Wave of dead sea creatures hits Chile's beaches

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Thousands of dead clams pictured on the shores of Chiloe Island

Heaps of dead whales, salmon and sardines blamed on the El Nino freak weather phenomenon have clogged Chile's Pacific beaches in recent months.

Last year, scientists were shocked when more than 300 whales turned up dead on remote bays of the southern coast. It was the first in a series of

grim finds.

At the start of this year, a surge in algae in the water choked to death an estimated 40,000 tons of salmon in the Los Lagos region, where the Andes tower over lakes and green farming valleys down to the coast.

That is about 12 percent of annual salmon production in Chile, the world's second-biggest producer of the fish after Norway.

This month, some 8,000 tons of sardines were washed up at the mouth of the Queule river. And thousands of dead clams piled up on the coast of Chiloe Island.

Authorities blamed a "red tide" of algae.

They banned fishing in the affected region, putting thousands of fishermen out of work.

"We have red tides every year in southern Chile, but this time it reached further north," said Jorge Navarro, a researcher at the marine institute IDEAL.

"It affected bivalve populations (such as clams) that had never before been exposed like this" to the algae, he said.



Experts suspect the growth of fish farming in Chile's southern Patagonia region is to blame for killing the salmon and clams

On the shores of Santa Maria Island off the center off Chile's long coast, cuttlefish have been washed up dead in the thousands.

Various beaches in the center of the country were closed meanwhile as the specimens of the dreaded Portuguese Man-of-War jellyfish, normally foreign to the area, floated nearby.

Shifting oceans

Scientists largely blame the anomalies on El Nino, a disruptive [weather phenomenon](#) that comes with warming [sea surface temperatures](#) in the equatorial Pacific.

With its 4,000 kilometers (2,485 miles) of Pacific coastline, Chile is particularly exposed to the effects of El Nino, which strikes every few years.

"We think that a common factor in the deaths of creatures in southern Chile, in the salmon farms and in fish off the coast is the El Nino phenomenon," said experts at the Chilean fisheries institute IFOP.

The current El Nino "has been classed as one of the most intense in the past 65 years," they told AFP in a statement.



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species by consuming oxygen in the water or filling it with toxins.

"The Chilean ocean is shifting and changing," said Sergio Palma, an oceanographer at Valparaiso Catholic University.

"There has been a series of events that indicate an El Nino which is making its presence felt in many ways."

Fish farming impact

But scientists also suspect other causes for the mass destruction of the sea creatures.

The huge toll of whales last year "could be caused by a natural ecological process" that may be nothing to do with what killed the sardines and clams, said Laura Farias, an oceanographer at Concepcion University.

"There is no ecological, oceanographic or climatic explanation" linking the whales to the other incidents, she said.

She suspects the growth of fish farming in Chile's southern Patagonia region is to blame for killing the salmon and clams.

"There are studies indicating that in Patagonia the greater occurrence of toxic blooms could be a consequence of aquaculture."

Various scientists have said the current El Nino seems to be subsiding, causing the surface of the sea to cool slowly.

The mass destruction of sea life has been a wake-up call, however.

"Chile still lacks information about the sea," said Valesca Montes, a fisheries specialist at the Chilean branch of the World Wildlife Fund.

"It has to invest in oceanographic studies, so that we can predict certain events" and be better prepared for climate change.

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