Mexico's Caribbean coast hit by heavy seaweed, more expected
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Environmentalists and tourism operators on Mexico’s Caribbean coast are complaining about mounds of foul-smelling sargassum—a seaweed-like algae—that are piling up on beaches and turning turquoise waters brown.

Reports Tuesday said sargassum is hitting resorts like Playa del Carmen and Tulum further south on the coast, while Cancun, Cozumel and Isla Mujeres have largely been spared.

But experts at the University of South Florida say sargassum was at "a historical record" in the Caribbean in May and that 2021 may see large amounts piling up on beaches, as happened in 2018.

A coalition of environmental and tourism groups has circulated a petition calling on the government to do mores, writing "We are drowning in Sargazo!"

"The predictions are that the amounts arriving in 2021 may be larger" than in 2018 or 2019, the coalition wrote. "If this isn't handled immediately, the environment, public health and the local economy are in grave danger."

"Tons of sargazo piling up and decaying in beaches has contributed to erosion, which wipes out sea grasses and marine life, deteriorates coastal water quality and seriously affects the coral reefs of Mexico's Caribbean," the petition continued.

Photos of the coast showed mats of sargassum choking the beaches and waters of Playa del Carmen.

The Mexican government has put the Navy in charge of gathering floating mats of sargassum at sea with special boats before it hits the beaches, and some resorts have installed floating barriers to try to keep the sargassum out to sea.

But the Navy acknowledged in a report Tuesday that its has collected about 22 times more sargassum from beaches than from the sea.

And many of the floating barriers failed to work, either becoming unmoored or collapsing under the weight of the accumulated seaweed. The tons of sargassum that build up behind the booms have to be gathered up, put aboard boats and taken away in what could amount to hundreds of trips every day.

The Navy also said many beaches on the coast reported "high" or "very high" amounts of seaweed. Environmentalists are also calling on the government to define what to do with the seaweed once it is collected, arguing that if it is just sent to landfills to rot, it could contaminate aquifers and fresh water supplies.

The problem comes amid an upsurge in coronavirus cases along the coast as the state of Quintana Roo seeks to revive its vital tourism industry.

The governor of Quintana Roo state, Carlos Joaquin, wrote in his Twitter account that over the weekend, a record of 506 flights landed or took off
from Cancun and other airports, the highest number since the coronavirus pandemic began in early 2020.

"We are recovering our tourism, so be doubly careful" he wrote, urging residents to wear face masks and observe social distancing.

Mexico's Caribbean coast once provided half the country's tourism revenues, and very little sargassum reached it prior to 2014. But a possible combination of climate change, pollution from fertilizers and ocean flows and currents carrying the algae mats to the Caribbean has caused the problem to explode.

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