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Rash on Alameda beachgoers blamed on invading snail

By **Mike Taugher Contra Costa Times**

Posted: 09/26/2010 12:00:00 AM PDT

Updated: 09/27/2010 08:52:14 AM PDT

A nasty rash that has been affecting swimmers and waders off Crown Memorial State Beach in Alameda for the past several years is the result of the Bay's ongoing problems with invasive species, researchers have reported.

The culprit is a previously unknown parasite carried by the Japanese bubble snail, a 3/4-inch snail first discovered in the Bay in 1999 and in Alameda by 2003.

The snail is now abundant on Alameda's beach, according to the report, published in the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's journal Emerging Infectious Diseases.

The parasite causes swimmer's itch, which, except for a number of cases at Crown Beach in 1954, was nearly nonexistent on the West Coast until a 2001 outbreak in British Columbia and, in 2005, a rash of rashes in Alameda.

Swimmer's itch can range from a minor annoyance to something akin to poison oak, said Andrew Cohen, one of the report's authors and an expert on aquatic invasive species.

"This is a clear example of a public health impact resulting from a marine invasion," Cohen said, adding that invading species can carry more serious diseases.

In 2005, about 90 children, many of whom were celebrating the end of the school year, were infected at the beach.

Though common in freshwater lakes and ponds, Cohen said swimmer's itch also occurs along the coast of New England and Australia.

"There are places where people are reluctant to go in the water because of this stuff," he said.

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itch in 1954 at Crown Beach, researchers discovered the previously unknown parasitic, the microscopic flatworm in the bubble snails.

No one knows how the Japanese snails arrived in the Bay, but Cohen said they could have come in the ballast water or hulls of ships, or they could have arrived with oysters planted in the Bay or used in 1990s scientific experiments that were done with oysters.

The West Coast's largest estuary, made up of the Bay and Delta, is widely considered to be the world's most biologically invaded. At last count, Cohen said, there were 234 invasive plants and animals in the estuary's waters with

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about four new arrivals every year.

Though invaders are considered mostly an ecological threat, Cohen said the outbreak shows they can affect public health and recreation.

"There's no reason to think that it wouldn't spread wherever this snail goes," Cohen said.

"For beachgoers, this could be a very regrettable thing."

Mike Taugher covers the environment. Contact him at 925-943-8257.

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