

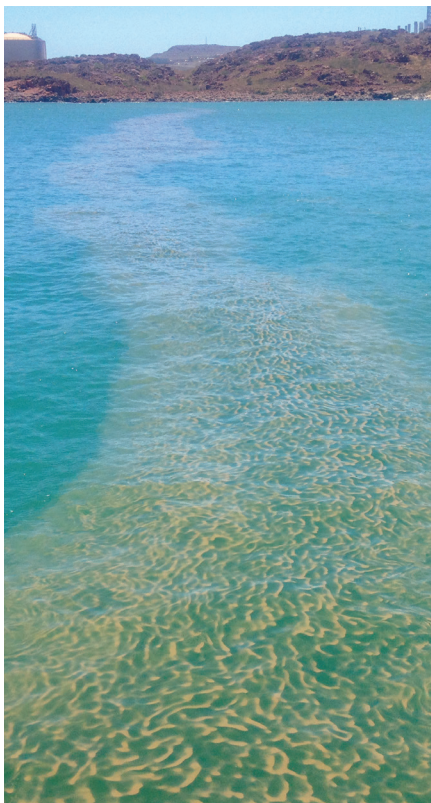
Trichodesmium

Sea sawdust - a living slick

ENVIRONMENT AND HERITAGE MANAGING OUR MARINE ENVIRONMENTS



Each year, from September until the end of April, large blooms of blue-green algae can be observed floating in waters off the Pilbara coast.



In the water, Trichodesmium bloom resembles floating saw dust.

The blooms are commonly known as 'sea sawdust' because they look like yellow-brown sawdust floating on the water's surface.

What is that slick?

Trichodesmium, pronounced Trike-o-des-mi-um, is a natural phenomenon seen throughout north west Western Australia, approaching and during summer, as water temperatures increase.

When the algae starts decomposing on the beach it smells like rotting plant material and can have many assorted colours – green to purple, rust reds to pure black.

By comparison, oil slicks are usually dark when fresh, but become light brown

or rainbow coloured as they are broken down by bacteria and sunlight.

Trichodesmium is often mistaken for an oil slick, particularly when washed up on the shoreline. The key differences are that oil has no observable particles and

Trichodesmium are algae that smell like rotting plant material, will not immediately re-form when disturbed in water, are not sticky and are easy to wash off.



When observed from a distance, decomposing Trichodesmium on beaches and coastal areas can resemble an oil or paint spill.



Trichodesmium varies in colour - from green to purple, rust reds to pure black.

forms a film of rainbow swirls. Oil will also have a distinct hydrocarbon smell, stick to objects and will re-form quickly after being disturbed in the water.

The formation and appearance of these slicks derive from wind and wave conditions and are not an indicator of local nutrient enrichment.

Trichodesmium cells have no need for water based nitrogen and can be an important component of marine productivity.

Is it harmful?

Unlike other blue-green algae, Trichodesmium is generally not harmful for most people. However, some species can be toxic to marine creatures.

People are advised not to come into direct skin contact with the algae in the water as it has been known to cause irritation.

Reporting a slick?

If you are unsure whether you are looking at oil or algae, please report it to Pilbara Ports' vessel traffic services straight away on:

- Port Hedland - 9173 9030 or VHF 12
- Dampier - 9159 6556 or VHF 11
- Ashburton - 9159 6556 or VHF 14

About Pilbara Ports

Pilbara Ports is the world's largest bulk export port authority, responsible for the ports of Ashburton, Dampier, Port Hedland and Varanus Island.

Pilbara Ports adopts an approach of responsible environmental stewardship to port controlled land, seabed and waters at all port locations.



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Contact us

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