

# WHY ARE THEY WORRIED?

## Utilizing the Cultural Theory of Risk Assessment to Assess Public Perceptions and Knowledge of an environmental risk

Angela B. Lindsey, Sandra Anderson, Ricky W. Telg, Christa Court, and Ashley McLeod-Morin

### INTRODUCTION

- Red tide blooms most often occur in the ocean and nearshore coastal waters.
- Florida suffered two significant HAB events between 2017-2019 and a large red tide event in 2018 causing direct economic impacts of more than \$184 million.
- Perceptions are often developed based on cultural values and developed the cultural theory of risk assessment.
- **Purpose:** determine the knowledge and perceptions of the public to the HAB events in 2017-2019, current HABs, and future HAB events; and to determine if reported knowledge and perceptions were based on cultural rationality.

### METHODS

- Three focus groups with the public were conducted in spring and summer 2021 in metropolitan coastal areas within Florida.
- One group was conducted virtually for each location. Total participation was 22.
- Discussion centered on determining knowledge and perceptions of HABs, discussion of community and personal effects, concerns with other red tide events and HABs, and lastly, information-seeking behavior.
- Data from each of the focus groups was combined and analyzed utilizing a constant comparison method to develop themes. Themes were then analyzed with the cultural theory of risk assessment.

### CONCLUSIONS

- Themes that emerged included the negative social impact of not being able to participate in activities in and around the beach/water.
- All three groups indicated concern regarding the costs of quality of life, environment, and livelihood within their communities.
- These results show that perceptions and knowledge of HAB are strongly tied to cultural rationality, including personal experience, social norms, and community concerns.
- It is important when communicating about environmental risks that communicators consider that audiences will assess risks culturally.

*We spent practically a year without visiting the beaches. It was really traumatic, especially for the kids.*

*There was a huge environmental impact. Also, living on the beach in St. Pete, I witnessed an economic impact as well with the seafood restaurants. There were a lot of restaurants that didn't survive.*