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NOAA to collect samples from 'unprecedented' bloom in the Great Atlantic Sargassum Belt

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By Responsible Seafood Advocate

Samples could help answer critical questions about the Sargassum belt

Scientists aboard a U.S. research vessel in the tropical Atlantic are taking advantage of the ship's long-planned path through the Great Atlantic Sargassum Belt to take some of the first samples from a massive, ongoing bloom.

This opportunistic sampling is taking place on the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) ship, which set sail from Port Suape, Brazil on March 6 as part of the Global Ocean Ship-based Hydrographic Investigations Program (GO-SHIP), funded by both NOAA and the National Science Foundation. The Sargassum sampling illustrates how scientists aboard research vessels can quickly respond to oceanographic phenomena of widespread societal importance in real time.

"This has been a great way to leverage the measurements we were already making in the region," said Ellen Park, a graduate student who authored a [blog \(https://www.go-bgc.org/expedition/atlantic-2023/sargassum-sampling\)](https://www.go-bgc.org/expedition/atlantic-2023/sargassum-sampling) on the team's efforts.



Scientists on board a NOAA research vessel are taking samples from a massive, ongoing bloom in the Great Atlantic Sargassum Belt. Photo and video courtesy of Ellen Park ©Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution.

Researchers from Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI), the University of South Florida and Florida Atlantic University are collaboratively tracking the Sargassum belt from satellite observations and analyzing these opportunistic samples, with the goal of studying the distribution of different species of Sargassum and measuring their elemental composition to better understand their origin. The nutrient supply feeding these blooms remains enigmatic, and hypothesized sources include upwelling/mixing, atmospheric deposition and river runoff. These samples can help answer some of these critical questions.

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In 2011, researchers **first observed** (<https://www.nature.com/articles/nature12860>), abnormally large accumulations of Sargassum in the tropical Atlantic Ocean, Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico, the blooms have gotten worse – with substantial economic costs associated with coastal inundation. While the algae support birds and sea life in the open ocean, it can have adverse impacts on environmentally and economically important ecosystems when they reach the shore. As it starts to decay, Sargassum emits hydrogen sulfide fumes that impact human health.

Sargassum Patch



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