

Algae growth may threaten Begonia parade

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CAPITOLA — Imagine a Capitola Begonia Festival without its premiere event, the Nautical Parade. No more begonia-decked floats coming down Soquel Creek with 10,000 cheering spectators along the banks.

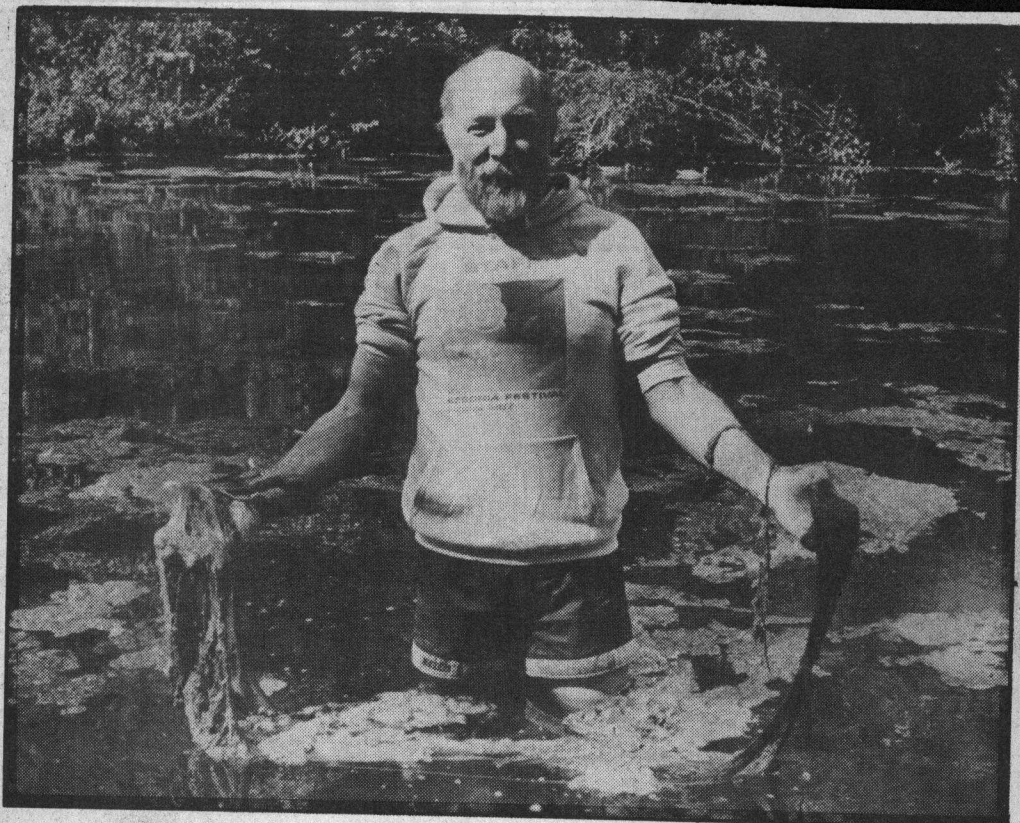
It could happen.

An unusually high algae bloom, however, is worrying both city and Begonia Festival officials. The algae is especially prevalent along the traditional Nautical Parade route where Soquel Creek empties into Capitola Lagoon. The algae could clog boat motors, making it impossible for boats to tow the floats.

Possible solutions have included opening up the lagoon to flush out the algae to "algae harvests" and treating water with chemicals.

No matter what, Begonia Festival spokesman Nels Westman is confident the 34th annual parade will go on Sept. 13. "There's no doubt in my mind we'll have a parade," he said.

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Pete Amos/Sentinel

Begonia Festival spokesman Nels Westman holds algae.

Algae

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The algae problem is worse this year because of numerous factors. Sewage leaks from aging and malfunctioning sewer laterals have combined with unusually low water flow and stagnant water, making for ideal algae conditions. Water tests by the county Environmental Health Department also show the fecal coliform count to be above the state norm. Signs have been posted in the area most of the summer warning the public to stay out of the water.

Exacerbating the algae problem is the fact that the state Department of Fish and Game has prohibited the city from treating the lagoon and creek with copper sulfate, a practice that has been going on for years.

According to Fish and Game fisheries biologist Linda Ulmer, Capitola's use of copper sulfate is — and has been — illegal. City Manager Steve Burrell said the city has been using copper sulphate in the creek "at least for the eight years I've been here."

Ulmer said the algae-killing chemical is highly toxic to fish and may be linked to the deteriorating numbers of steelhead that annually breed in the creek.

Copper sulfate was believed to be the cause of a dramatic fish kill in early July at Kelly Lake in Watsonville. Some 50,000 sculpins — a small bottom-eating fish — as well as bass suffocated after the chemical killed the algae. The algae decomposed, robbing the water of oxygen.

Burrell is talking with the Fish and Game department about an alternative treatment — called Aquazine — against the algae.

However, upon suggestion by Councilwoman Stephanie Harlan, the city will also look into the possibility of opening the lagoon to flush out the algae before the Nautical Parade.

Such a flushing may not be feasible, said Westman, because of low rainfall this past year. "The flow down the stream is so nominal, we're afraid the lagoon wouldn't fill back up," he said.

Ulmer said a midsummer flushing would also require various permits from Fish and Game, as well as the state Coastal Commission. The fear there is that such a flushing could wash fingerling steelhead into the ocean where they would die.

Ulmer believes the most logical solution is the Aquazine treatment. While it's non-toxic to fish, Aquazine can kill riparian vegetation. However, she doesn't foresee a problem as long as the Aquazine is applied properly.