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DATELINE: PARADISE

## Our dirty little secret is no longer secret -- or little

By Michael Suib

It's official: In a crowning but odorous achievement, Key West has been placed among the top 10 in the state of Florida by the National Resources Defense Council.

This city loves to make the Top Ten list of anything, and usually does, and can now claim to be among the royalty of, well, poop.

Clawing its way toward the pinnacle of fecal obnoxia, two of our beaches, Higgs and South Beach, are on the list of the 10 dirtiest Florida beaches in 2004. South Beach had warnings and advisories about unsafe water quality posted a whopping 196 days last year, while Higgs Beach clocked in with a mere 133 days of postings. To put this in perspective, the average Florida beach violated the public health-based bacteria standard only 3 percent of the time, or approximately 11 days. And while that's bad news, there is also good news, and some more bad news, and then a dollop of good news.

The good news is that I've yet to see a national survey of the "Top Ten Slimiest Places To Set Up Your Beach Umbrella," so I guess we're ahead of the game. The bad news is that this year Higgs Beach has posted warnings and advisories for the past six weeks in a row ending July 26 and, finally, something to be proud of: We are not yet on the top of the list. That honor goes to a couple of upstate beaches (to see the complete list go to [www.nrdc.org](http://www.nrdc.org)). So we've not yet been crowned "No. 1 in No. 2," but we're close, too close for my swimming comfort.

I am, though, a little confused. The city and its residents have spent somewhere in the neighborhood of a gazillion dollars (closer to \$100 million) to replumb the entire island, repairing and replacing leaks of various dimensions correcting a full spectrum of problems from individual home and business hook-ups to entire main-line conduits and a new state-of-the-art sewage treatment plant.

### THE BLAME GAME

Before the major replumbing took place, the causes of Key West's poor water quality had been blamed at various times on the following: the homeless; dogs; cats; fish; birds; boat people; trailer people; "those people" -- but never officially (nudge, nudge, wink, wink) at the cruise ship industry, which is allowed to dump city-size loads of gray water (that's the stuff that winds up in the sink drains) and black water (that's the other stuff, the stuff we don't talk about) into the ocean within sight of our share of ``Top Ten Beaches."

Cruise ships are legally able to flush it out when they reach the three-mile marker off shore. Consider that the next time you're sitting on a beach chair at Higgs Beach drinking a cold one and thinking about putting your little piggies into the clear azure aqua as one of those behemoths of the sea plods its way out of Key West's main channel. Can you hear those toilets flushing?

The man in charge of the sewer project is David Fernandez, director of the Key West Utilities Department. Last week in a Herald article he was quoted as stating that through the use of DNA testing, the city has been able to determine that the source of one third of the pollution encountered was "unknown," a little more than a third comes from birds, about 15 percent from canines, 4 percent from felines, less than 2 percent from humans and the balance from iguanas, raccoons and other assorted critters.

Here's where my confusion comes in: The one-third unknown. If it's not human, and it's not from known critters, then what? That's got me worried. If this were Roswell, N.M., I would be thinking aliens. But Key West? We have plenty of our own resident aliens, from those with expired visas to several people I'm fairly certain are

from somewhere in the neighborhood of Alpha Centauri, but I'm pretty sure they're not fouling the sea.

Mr. Fernandez was on vacation this week, so I spoke to Greg Smith, who works for OMI, the company that helps to manage and operate Key West's waste-treatment plant. Smith told me that DNA testing is hardly done anymore, and that the original test samples were matched with a library of existing specimens taken from around the island. Officials were easily able to match a local cat, dog or rooster with bacteria taken from the ocean.

### **STILL A MYSTERY**

But the one-third still unknown? As Shakespeare said, "That is the question," and it is still a mystery.

I'm going to plunge on and get to the bottom of this fecal matter, even if it's the last thing that I ever do do.

Something doesn't smell just right. I'm in the thick of it now, right up to my eyebrows, and I'm going to flush out the truth. You won't find me sitting down on the job.

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