



Protecting Our Bay: What Can We Do?

by **Kelley Murfin**, MSPH, on behalf of the UTMB Institute for Translational Sciences | **June 1 2017**

A group of around 40 curious community members gathered on May 18th at MOD Coffeehouse to discuss issues facing the Galveston Bay. This conversation, part of the Science and Communities Interact (SCI) Café series, was led by Dr. Cornelis “Kees” Elferink, Director of UTMB’s [Center for Environmental Toxicology](#) and Scott Jones, Director of Advocacy at the [Galveston Bay Foundation](#).

The Galveston Bay Foundation aims to “preserve and enhance Galveston Bay as a healthy and productive place for generations to come” and works with a community of scientists, policy analysts, and members of the public who are dedicated to the health of the Bay. Jones, in his current role, conducts outreach for Bay-related topics – including storm surge mitigation, seafood safety, and Superfund sites – and lobbies for legislation that will protect the Bay.

Dr. Elferink’s work includes researching the ecological components of the factors that impact our area. He sees ongoing research about the Bay as an opportunity to gain new understandings about ecological health.

Both Elferink and Jones emphasized that following successful implementation of the Clean Water Act, the biggest threat to the Bay’s health is not industry; it’s population and water pollution. In other words, we as a community have a responsibility to actively take an interest in the health of the Bay and participate in efforts to protect it.

Various concerns were raised about pathogen- and pharmaceutical-related threats to the Bay, especially following Hurricane Ike. Jones reassured the group that bacteria like *Vibrio* are seasonal, and Hurricane Ike did not change the Bay’s overall pathogen load. Elferink added that, while existing industrial and residential filtration systems are very effective at removing bacteria, they are less effective at removing some of the pharmaceutical toxicants from the water supply. Because these toxicants can impact the Bay’s animal and plant life, we need to be very careful about properly disposing prescriptions and other medical waste.

Many community members were curious about ongoing initiatives to preserve existing reefs and rebuild damaged ones. In response, Jones discussed the Galveston Bay Foundation’s [Oyster Shell Recycling Program](#), which utilizes oyster shells recycled from participating restaurants as “bricks” to support reef creation. He encouraged attendees

to ask their local restaurants if they are members of the recycling program.

Throughout the discussion, the speakers and community members emphasized the need for increased funding to support Bay preservation efforts. Specifically, funding is needed for surveillance and monitoring of seafood safety, but it is currently not part of the state’s budget. Jones said that receiving sustainable funding can only be accomplished via a combination of favorable political will, a strong basis of scientific evidence displaying need for funding, and consistent community advocacy.



Photo credit: UTMB

What can you do to help preserve the Bay?

- Conserve water
- Properly dispose of all waste, including household trash, expired or unused prescription drugs, pet waste, and boat trash and sewage
- Ask your local restaurants to participate in the Oyster Shell Recycling Program
- Assist in lobbying efforts – call or write to your local representatives, and ask them to support legislation and funding that protects the Bay

The Institute for Translational Sciences and the Sealy Center for Environmental Health and Medicine at UTMB invite you to come be a part of the conversation! SCI Café is open to the public and is free to attend. This was our last SCI Café of the academic year, but we’ll resume our chats in September. These discussions will be held at MOD Coffeehouse, located at 2126 Post Office Street in Galveston. We hope to see you there!