BEST PRACTICE ADVICE

Avoid travelling over seagrass, or if it is unavoidable keep your speed to a minimum.

Avoid grounding or drying out on seagrass at all times by being aware of where known seagrass areas are located and keeping a careful watch on your depth and tidal movements. If you do ground, less damage is incurred if the tide is allowed to float you off or you are pulled clear with a rope.

Avoid anchoring in known seagrass areas (which may be marked by signs or buoys) and use fixed moorings where ever possible. If visibility permits, try and anchor on bare sand.

If you do anchor near seagrass, motor up to your anchor when pulling it up rather than dragging it through the seagrass

If you have holding tanks, use pump-out facilities where available or empty your tanks in deep, well flushed open areas. Avoid using your sea toilet close to seagrass beds.

Avoid transferring invasive species by rinsing any mud and vegetation off your anchor and chain before leaving an area.

MANAGEMENT SCHEMES IN THE HELFORD RIVER AND STUDLAND BAY

The Helford Estuary on the south coast of Cornwall is popular with visiting yachts and local boat owners because of its beautiful scenery and naturally sheltered waters. The shallow waters also provide perfect conditions for the growth of seagrass which flourishes in the estuary.

In the late 1990s concerns were raised after surveys suggested that the seagrass beds were becoming damaged by anchoring[14]. A voluntary no-anchoring zone was set up with the support of the local sailing club and the manager of the moorings.

The voluntary no-anchoring zone is marked by buoys and a postcard showing the zone and the local area helps ensure boaters are aware.

The voluntary approach has been very successful in reducing the number of boats anchoring on the seagrass and recent surveys indicate that the bed is in excellent health and may even be expanding.

Following concerns that the level of boating activity at Studland Bay in Dorset was causing a decline in the seagrass meadows and may have a detrimental impact on the seahorse population there, the Studland Seagrass and Seahorse Study Group was set up. The group is a partnership of stakeholders and organisations with an interest in the site and its wildlife.

In order to determine if the level of boating activity at Studland is impacting on the seagrass meadows, a two year research project has been initiated. The study involves creating a voluntary no-anchor zone (vnaz) and a similar unmarked zone to study the effect of anchoring in the seagrass. It is hoped that the study will provide scientific evidence to inform the debate and assist future management.



Image courtesy of Steve Trewhella

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This fact sheet has been compiled with the kind support of The Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust.

For more information see www.hwt.org.uk

THE GREEN BLUE is the environmental awareness initiative for the marine industry, and for boaters and water sports enthusiasts. It is run by the British Marine Federation and the Royal Yachting Association with support from The Crown Estate and Scottish Natural Heritage.

Details of the papers referred to in this fact sheet are available in the research section of The Green Blue's website www.thegreenblue.org.uk

THE GREEN BLUE, RYA House, Ensign Way, Hamble, Southampton, Hampshire SO31 4YA
Phone: 023 8060 4100 Fax: 023 8060 4294 E-mail: info@thegreenblue.org.uk

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WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT...

SEAGRASS

The importance of seagrass and how to minimise your impact on it is explained in this factsheet.

INTRODUCTION

Seagrasses are a unique group of plants, being the only ones to be able to live in saltwater. Four species occur in the UK and the two most frequently found are known as eelgrass (scientifically referred to as Zostera sp.), because of their long thin leaves, looking very much like the long grass seen on land. Seagrass requires high light levels to grow and shelter from waves and strong currents[1]. As such it is only found in intertidal and shallow subtidal areas in harbours, estuaries and well protected bays where it can form dense beds or meadows.

Much of our seagrass has been lost in the last century due to disease. Coastal development, dredging and pollution have hampered recovery and further contributed to its decline[1]. Globally 18 percent of the documented seagrass area has been lost due to direct or indirect human impacts in the last two decades[2].

In this country seagrass is now classified as a nationally scarce habitat, occurring in a few sheltered sites around the UK coast.

Although little is known about the long-terms effects of recreational boating on seagrass, studies have shown that it can cause short-term damage.

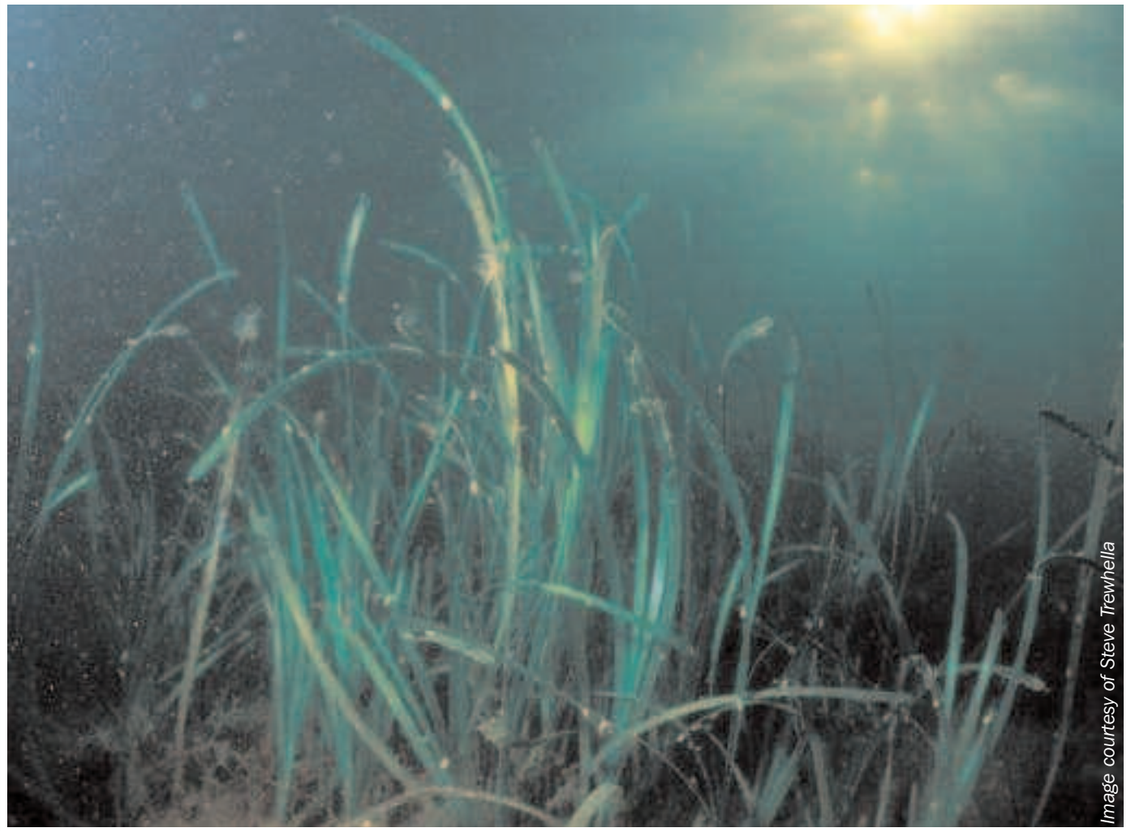


Image courtesy of Steve Trewhella

IMPORTANCE OF SEAGRASS

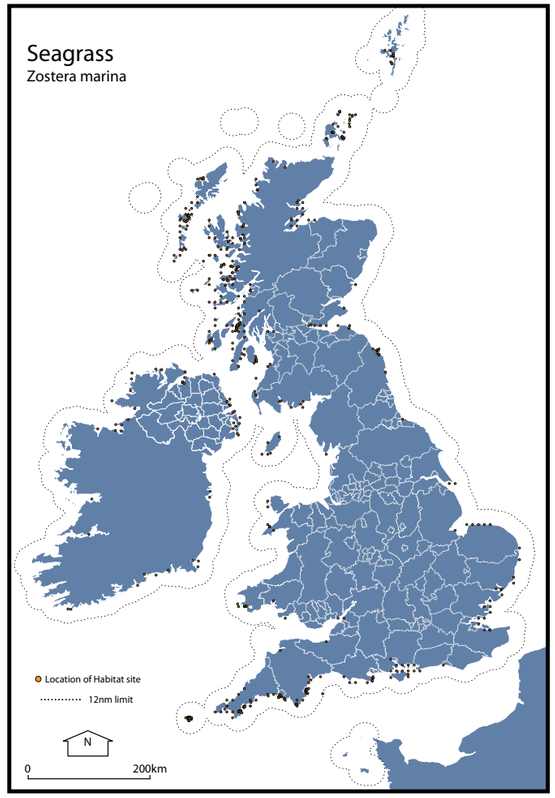
Seagrass beds support populations of various marine animals and plants. They act as nursery areas, providing protection for juvenile fish including commercially important species like bass[3,4]. They also host a myriad of invertebrates, worms and shellfish, and provide a valuable food source for grazing wildfowl such as Brent geese[5]. The two native species of seahorse are also shown to have a strong association with seagrass in the southern UK.

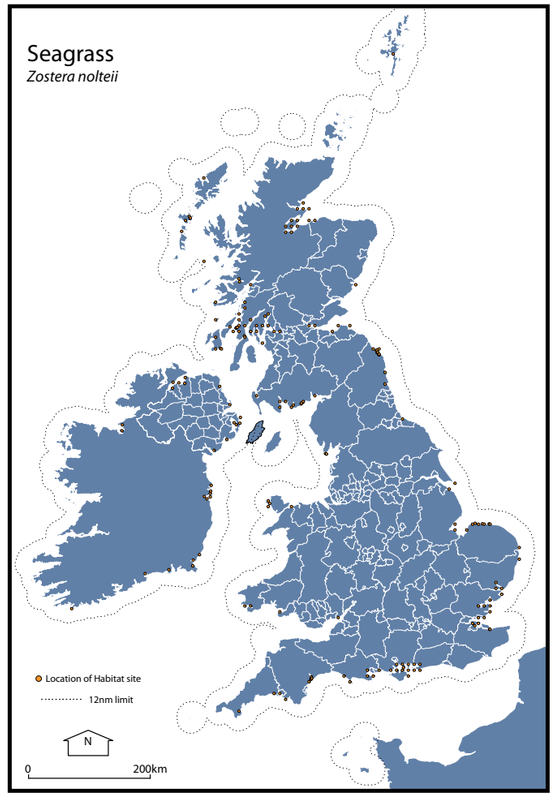

Image courtesy of Steve Trewhella


Image courtesy of Steve Trewhella

Spiny Seahorse, *Hippocampus guttulatus*

Seagrass meadows can also reduce seabed erosion as their roots bind the sediment in place, helping to defend our coastline[1].





Maps courtesy of Marine Conservation Society, Marine Local Biodiversity Action Plan Guidance Manual for England

IMPACTS OF BOATING

As recreational boaters our impacts are generally small scale but can be significant in some localised areas. Below are some of the ways that boats have been known to damage seagrass:

VESSEL GROUNDING

If this occurs on a seagrass bed it can uproot the plants, damaging the bed in localised areas[6,7].

PROPELLER WASH

Scouring of the seabed and disturbance from wash can damage, dislodge and smother plants. In areas of heavy boat traffic this can lead to clearly visible scarring of the seagrass bed[8].

ANCHORING

Anchoring, dragging and boat wash can all have a negative effect on the seabed. This is especially important in sensitive habitats such as seagrass. Frequently used anchorages can often suffer from denuding and scarring[9].

MOORING

Fixed moorings within seagrass beds can cause scarring and scouring and a reduction in the levels of marine life supported by the sediment as the chain drags on the seabed at low tide[10]. Where there are lots of moorings it can cause the bed to fragment under certain conditions[11]. This kind of scarring from moorings is visible in places like Chichester Harbour and Torbay.

NUTRIENTS

Increased nutrient loading from sewage and grey water discharges can disrupt the delicate balance of coastal ecosystems. This can encourage the growth of fast growing algae which can smother or out-compete the seagrass[12].

POLLUTANTS

Some antifouling paints contain herbicides (although many have now been banned) and other toxic constituents, these can reduce the growth of the plants[13].


Image courtesy of Steve Trewhella

Mooring chains scouring the seabed can have a negative effect on a number of benthic species

CONCLUSIONS

Seagrass beds are a fragile and important coastal ecosystem that face many pressures, however, the actual impacts resulting from these pressures are still not fully understood.

Voluntary approaches to protecting seagrass have worked well in some areas and have contributed to a better understanding of the pressures and what boaters can do to help reduce their own impacts. The Green Blue is working with The Wildlife Trusts to learn more about seagrass and is actively working to get relevant information about sensitive areas placed into pilot books and (electronic) charts.

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