

Free  
poster inside

# ***Seagrass beds*** *of the* ***Salcombe Kingsbridge*** ***Estuary***

Find out about these wonderful coastal jungles  
and how we can all protect and enjoy them.  
Includes special information for boat users.



**Estuaries  
Partnership**

Encouraging sustainable use and enjoyment

## Why should we care?

- Seagrass meadows support an immensely rich but sensitive community of sealife - some like the fan mussel, the UK's largest clam, are rare themselves.
- They are vital egg laying and nursery areas for many types of fish and other sealife - some of which we later eat, helping support our local fishing industry.
- Globally, seagrasses are significantly important in the planet's carbon cycle, naturally trapping and storing massive amounts of carbon.
- Seagrass meadows help to stabilise seabed sediments, protecting vulnerable shores from erosion.

## Seagrass and boating

- Seagrass meadows are fascinating jungles of sealife; always look out for people snorkelling or exploring them and keep clear.
- Seagrasses are particularly vulnerable to unintentional propeller and anchor damage, so please always try to avoid these areas.
- If you find yourself within seagrass, it is poor seamanship to use your engine to force your way through the beds, and may damage your engine. It is very important to **STOP - LIFT** your engine - **PADDLE** away or over the seagrass - avoid excessive propeller wash until well clear.
- Avoid anchoring in or over seagrass, or allowing your boat to ground or drag over it.



Martin Aitill



Nigel Mortimer

Seagrass bed erosion.

## Seagrass conservation

We have two species of seagrass locally; the 'dwarf eelgrass' with its very narrow leaves found on the upper estuary mudflats towards Kingsbridge and the larger 'eelgrass' found on either side of the main harbour channel. In Salcombe, the seagrass has leaves reaching almost 2m in places and also unusually, grows higher up the shore than most places.

Despite their apparent healthiness locally, seagrass beds are rare. They have declined to just 10% of their former extent after a wasting disease in the 1930's thought to be water quality related. Monitoring the health of our seagrass beds is also helpful as an indicator for our other coastal habitats.

Good water quality is vital for the health of seagrass communities. Coastal development, dredging and excess nutrients from waste may all directly impact on their health. Any decrease in water clarity will also restrict seagrasses to shallower water.

Direct physical disturbances on seagrass beds are increasingly resulting in fragmentation of many beds (see section on recreational boating).

*"The seagrass beds in the Salcombe Kingsbridge estuary cover an area of over 122,000 m<sup>2</sup>."*

*"Always take extreme care when snorkeling amongst seagrass, keep in shallow water and make sure that you are highly visible to boat traffic"*

## Seagrass and you

Seagrass beds grow in shallow, sheltered waters which means that unlike many marine habitats they are easy to explore.

You can enjoy seagrass at low tide; just tread carefully on the beds and turn over the leaves to see what is sheltering underneath. Even better, snorkel when the tide is in, enjoy the scenery of waving leaves and see just how many different animals you can spot. If you are lucky you may see a seahorse clinging to seagrass or the top of a fan mussel buried in the sediment – please do report any that you find. See back cover for information on recording marine life.

Locations of seagrass beds in Salcombe Harbour.

 seagrass beds

500m

# Seagrass beds

## Underwater jungles of marine life

**M**eadows of lush, green seagrass lie beneath the water in many sheltered parts of our coast. Seagrasses are flowering plants with stems, leaves and roots. In the UK we have two species of seagrass; 'dwarf eelgrass' with its very narrow leaves, and the larger 'eelgrass' pictured here.

The network of roots and rhizomes hold sediment together and provide a stable home to all sorts of burrowing animals including worms, clams, crustaceans and sea urchins.

### Meet some of the inhabitants of a seagrass bed



#### Seahorse

There are two species of seahorse in the UK; the spiny seahorse and the short snouted seahorse. These enigmatic fish, famous for the males "giving birth", have a healthy appetite but small mouths, so the large number of tiny shrimps which inhabit seagrass beds make them great places for these fish to forage.



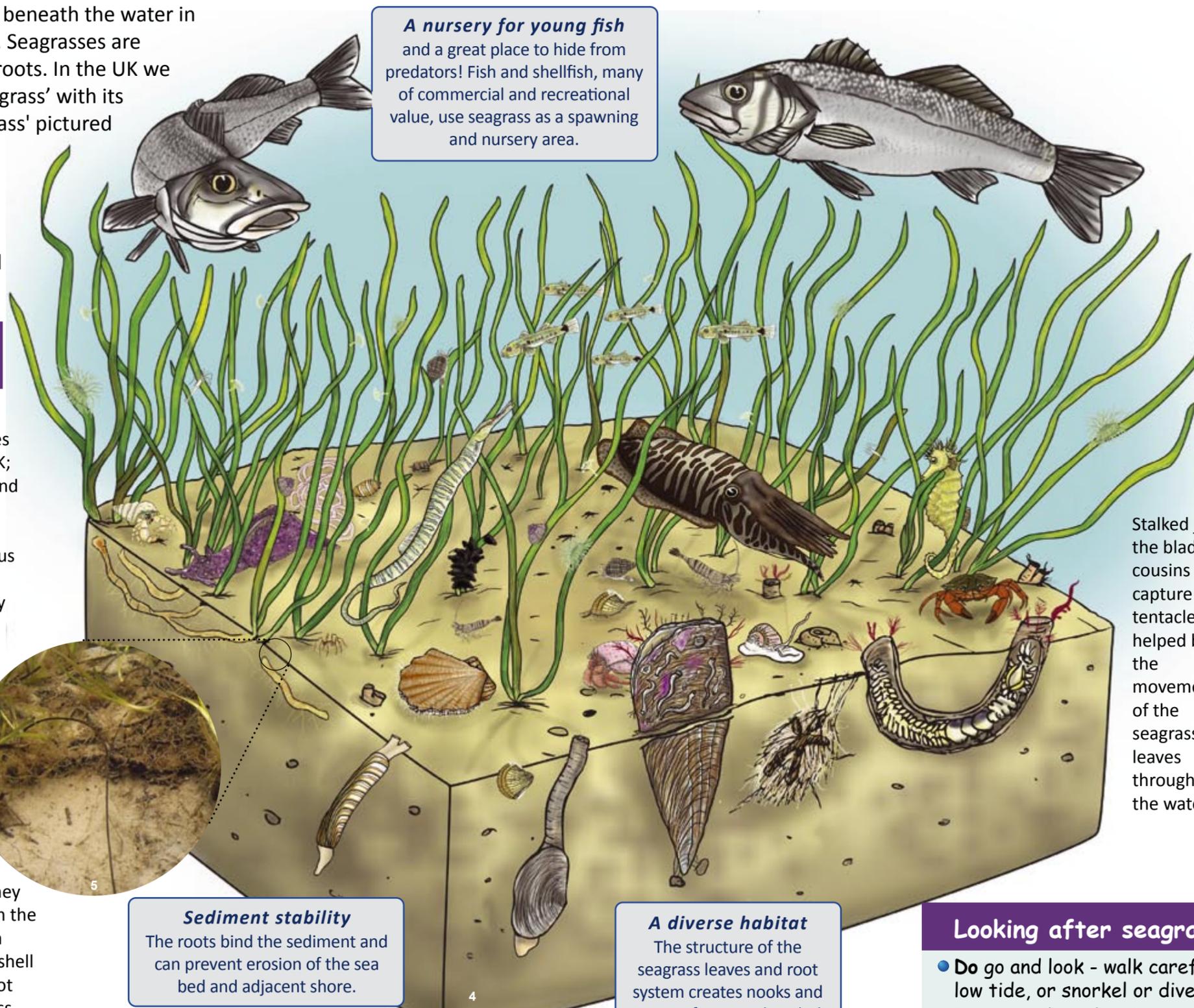
#### Fan mussel

These impressive clams can reach almost half a metre long! They embed themselves in the sediment with only a small portion of the shell protruding. Whilst not only found in seagrass

beds the stability of the sediment in this habitat may offer some advantages to the animal.

**Image credits:** 1 Keith Hiscock; 2 David Nicholson / Marine Biological Association; 3 Malcolm Nimmo; 4 Jack Sewell; 5, 6 & 7 Steve Trehwella - <http://ukcoastalwildlife.co.uk/>

**A nursery for young fish**  
and a great place to hide from predators! Fish and shellfish, many of commercial and recreational value, use seagrass as a spawning and nursery area.



**Sediment stability**  
The roots bind the sediment and can prevent erosion of the sea bed and adjacent shore.

**A diverse habitat**  
The structure of the seagrass leaves and root system creates nooks and crannies for animals to hide in and surfaces for them to attach to, which results in a high diversity of wildlife.

**Q:** How many different plants and animals can you find on the big picture? For the full list, visit: [www.marlin.ac.uk/seagrass](http://www.marlin.ac.uk/seagrass)

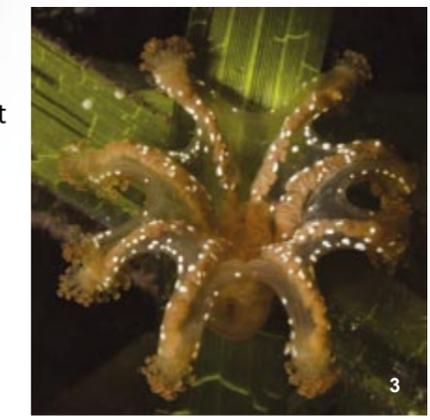


#### Cuttlefish

Each spring cuttlefish migrate inshore to mate. The females attach clutches of black eggs 'seagrapes' to the base of seagrass shoots. The shelter and food available for the tiny hatchlings (the size of a finger nail) may improve their chances of survival.

#### Stalked jellyfish

Stalked jellyfish live permanently attached to the blades of seagrass. Like their close cousins the anemones, stalked jellyfish capture their prey using stinging cells in their tentacles, helped by the movement of the seagrass leaves through the water.



**Looking after seagrass:**

- Do go and look - walk carefully at low tide, or snorkel or dive.
- Don't weigh anchor in a seagrass bed! Find out where to moor.
- Do find out how to reduce your impact on the marine environment.

# Wild flower meadows ...

## jungles under the sea

Beneath the water in many sheltered parts of our coast lie lush green meadows of seagrass; marine flowering plants with stems and leaves, roots and flowers. Seagrasses can grow from a single seed, but meadows normally form by the spread of roots and rhizomes – much like the couch grass found in many gardens.

At low spring tides exposed seagrass beds look limp and lifeless. But as the tide returns and the leaves float up, an underwater jungle rich in marine life comes alive. As well as providing vital food and shelter, this jungle is a spawning and nursery area for many other species; some of these, e.g. bass and bream, are commercially important too.

### Recording marine life

Recording marine life helps scientists and managers to protect and conserve special places in the sea.

For more information about marine life recording and to report all marine life sightings, please visit:

Please tell us **what** you saw, and **where** and **when** you saw it.

[www.marlin.ac.uk/rml](http://www.marlin.ac.uk/rml)

*(Scan the QR code with your phone camera for a link to the website)*



### Further information

For more information about seagrass in the Salcombe Kingsbridge estuary, or about conserving our marine resources, please contact:

#### The South Devon AONB Estuaries Officer

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[www.SouthDevonAONB.org.uk](http://www.SouthDevonAONB.org.uk)

*(Scan the QR code with your phone camera for a link to the website)*



The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development: Europe investing in rural areas

**Image credits:** Cover: Main image Keith Hiscock; Lr left Nigel Mortimer; Lr right Malcolm Nimmo. Inside cover: Guy Baker.