

Studland Bay Seagrass Project

Introduction

The recent addition of seahorses to the list of protected species under the Wildlife and Countryside Act has led to concerns over the possible impacts of recreational boat anchoring and mooring on seagrass meadows in Studland Bay, Dorset. In recent years both species of protected seahorses, spiny and short-snouted, have been found in the seagrass in Studland Bay.

It has been suggested by some that seagrass is unable to regenerate as a result of damage caused by anchoring and mooring and therefore has a detrimental effect on both species of seahorse which make their home in the seagrass found in the Bay. However, to date this link has not been proven. Local opinion also suggests that the seagrass extent has increased considerably over the years as a result of the presence of moorings within the Bay.

SeaStar Survey ¹ has been appointed by The Crown Estate and Natural England to undertake an independent scientific study aimed at quantifying any possible impacts on seagrass health and associated marine life. The study commenced in May 2009 and a voluntary no-anchor zone will be implemented in Studland Bay in September 2009 to help understand the impacts of anchoring in an area where this activity is controlled as well as in areas where management remains unchanged. The Crown Estate and Natural England look forward to the successful completion of the study.

Background

Although Studland is home to Britain's largest known colony of seahorses they are often difficult to spot and to monitor therefore relatively little is known about populations. At present there is also no robust scientific data on the decrease or increase of seagrass or on the health of the seahorse population.

There is some photographic evidence that anchors can cause large clumps of seagrass to become detached and that mooring chains "scour" the seabed creating bald patches. There is also a perception that this is causing long-term damage to the seagrass and in turn may threaten the seahorses and other fauna which make their home in the seagrass. To date this link has not been proven. Indeed, while individual moorings may, due to poor design, damage the seagrass in their immediate surroundings it has also been suggested that their presence may indirectly benefit the seagrass by halting destructive scallop dredging and trawling within the Bay as vessels of this nature are no longer able to manoeuvre sufficiently within the Bay. Local opinion is that the extent of the seagrass has increased considerably over the last 20-30 years as a direct result. There is also a suggestion that occasional scouring of the seabed could enhance the habitat.

Although The Crown Estate owns the seabed in Studland Bay its ownership is subject to the public rights of fishing and of navigation (which includes anchoring). This

¹ SeaStar Survey Ltd is an independent marine survey company based in Southampton specialising in supplying a range of environmental, oceanographic and hydrographic services to both the offshore and coastal industries. SeaStar Survey Ltd will be working on this study in conjunction with ABPmer, a leading UK marine environmental consultancy also based in Southampton.

means that the landowner cannot take unilateral action to prevent anchoring and any associated damage to seagrass that this may, or may not cause, because it does not have any legal basis upon which to do so.

The protection offered to seahorses under the Wildlife and Countryside Act means it is an offence to intentionally kill, injure or take them. In addition, it is an offence to damage or obstruct the seahorses' place of shelter or disturb them in their place of shelter. The Crown Estate has no statutory obligation in relation to the protection of seahorses under the Wildlife and Countryside Act. Natural England can issue licences for activities that would otherwise be illegal under the Wildlife and Countryside Act. Such licences would normally only be issued if there is a conservation, educational or scientific benefit. Natural England is responsible for investigating and taking enforcement action where licences they have issued for particular activities are breached. Where offences are committed by those without a licence, investigations and enforcement action is the responsibility of the Police and Crown Prosecution Service. Whilst the photographic evidence suggests that damage might be occurring through the anchoring of vessels or moorings used from time to time by local people it is very difficult to demonstrate that this activity is damaging the seahorses, or that this damage is deliberate and reckless as would need to be shown for a prosecution to succeed.

The Crown Estate and Natural England have agreed to fund an independent scientific study aimed at quantifying the impacts of anchoring and mooring on eelgrass health. A key element of this study is to establish a voluntary no-anchoring zone (100m * 100m) in order to monitor the health of the seagrass and populations of key associated flora and fauna, including seahorses, to help determine the potential rate of recovery in this area. Boaters will be asked to avoid anchoring in this area which will be marked by four yellow marker buoys on each corner as well as two in the centre of the zone. Monitoring will also take place in unmarked areas to assess the potential rate of decline in areas where management remains unchanged. The study commenced in May 2009 and monitoring will take place for a full two years. The study could be extended to three years depending on whether the results warrant further investigation. Part of the study will also consider the practicality of installing eco-friendly moorings and the long term status of moorings generally in Studland Bay.

The study is being overseen by a steering group comprising representatives of The Crown Estate, Natural England, Royal Yachting Association and the Chair of the Studland Seagrass and Seahorse Study Group (SSSSG). An independent reviewer will be appointed to join this steering group to advise on the project plan and review its findings. The SSSSG is an informal, non-statutory, focus and discussion group, formed of interested parties including: Dorset Wildlife Trust, local residents, National Trust, Natural England, Poole yacht clubs, Royal Yachting Association, Southampton University, Studland Parish Council, The Seahorse Trust, and The Crown Estate. Concurrently Natural England is funding a communications project, to be overseen by the Dorset Wildlife Trust and delivered by the SSSSG, aimed at explaining the presence, value and sensitivity of the seagrass and associated seahorse population in Studland Bay as well as communicating the aims of the study and the objectives of the voluntary no-anchor zone. The Seahorse Trust, with funding from the National Lottery, are also undertaking a seahorse tagging project at Studland in an effort to understand more about these elusive species.