

Seagrass beds

Underwater jungles of marine life

Why is seagrass so special?

Most of us have seen wild flower meadows on land where tall grasses wave in the wind, but beneath the water in many sheltered parts of our coast are lush green meadows of seagrass.

Despite their name seagrasses are not true grasses (or seaweeds), but flowering plants with stems, leaves and roots. In the UK there are only two species of seagrass ('eelgrass' *Zostera marina* and 'dwarf eelgrass' *Zostera noltii*). Large seagrass meadows can grow from a single seed, the roots and rhizomes spreading like couch grass.

Some of our seagrass can be exposed at low spring tides and lying flat on the shore, may look limp and

lifeless, but as the tide comes in and the leaves begin to float, an underwater jungle comes alive. This jungle provides vital food and shelter, and is a spawning and nursery area for many other species; some of these, e.g. bass and bream, are commercially important too.

Meet some of the inhabitants of a seagrass bed



Seahorse

These enigmatic fish are famous for the males "giving birth". Seahorses 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.



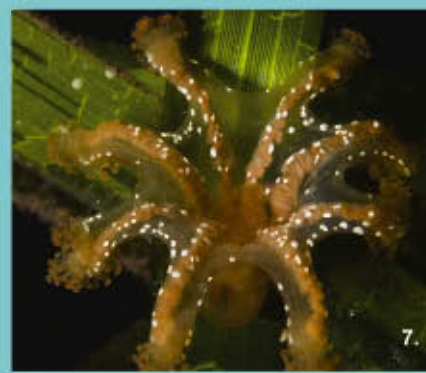
Cuttlefish

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.



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 may offer some advantages to the animal.



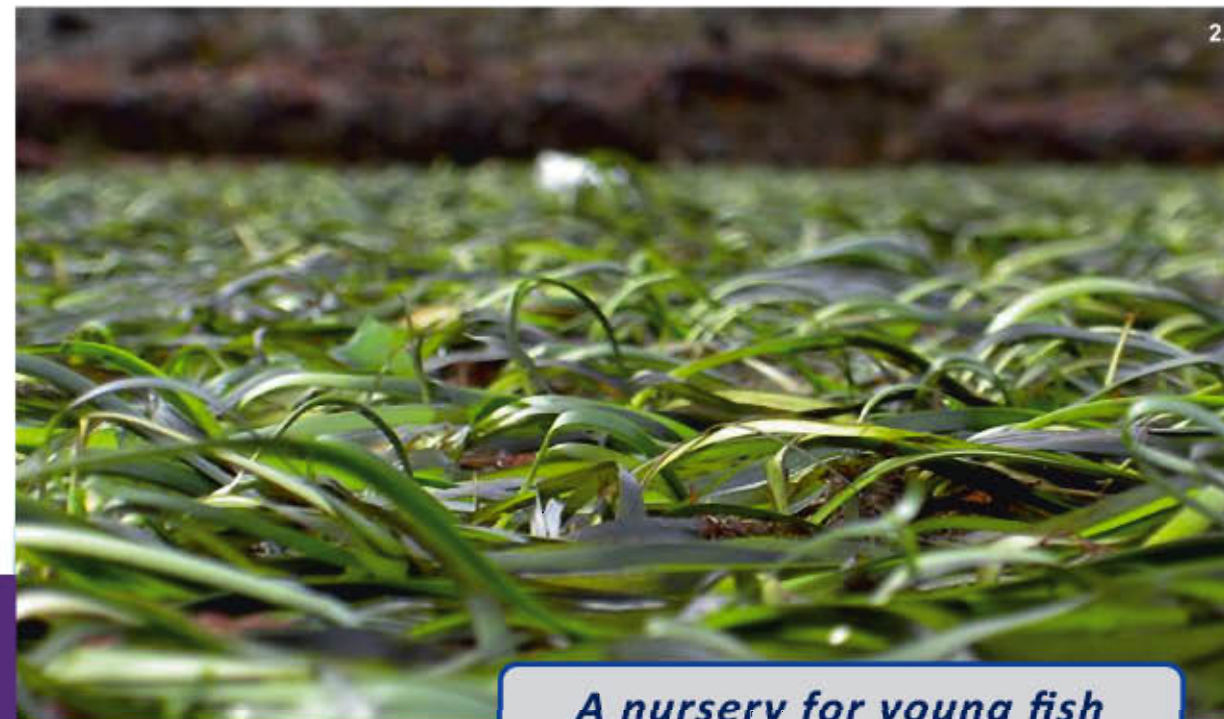
Stalked jellyfish

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

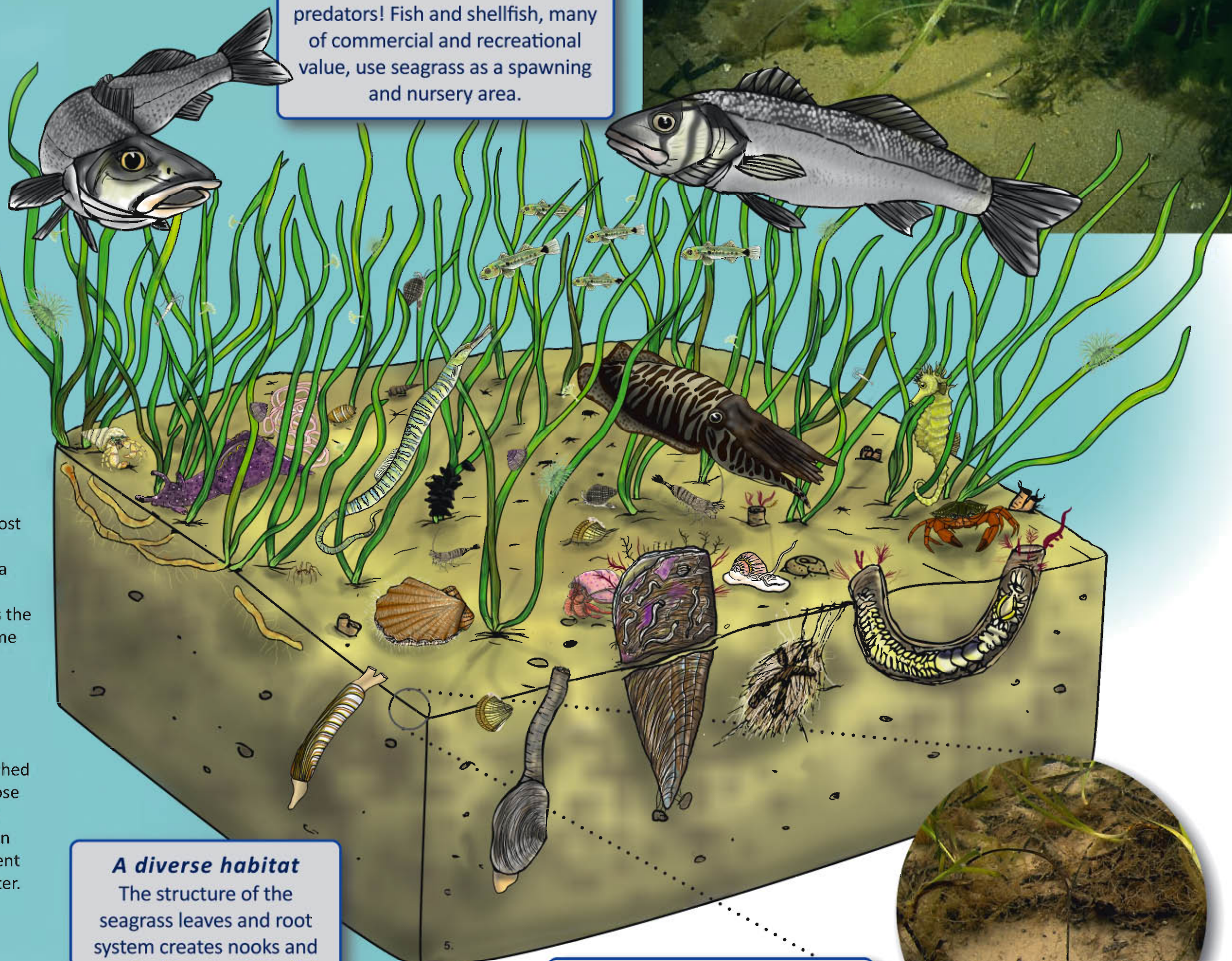
Seagrass under threat

There have been severe losses of eelgrass (*Z. marina*) in the North East Atlantic over the last 60 years. In the UK, eelgrass is nationally scarce and in decline.

Direct physical pressures on seagrass beds are increasingly resulting in losses and fragmentation of many beds. Boat anchoring, mooring chain and propeller scour, dredging and destructive fishing methods have all been shown to physically damage seagrass and their communities.



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.



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.

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

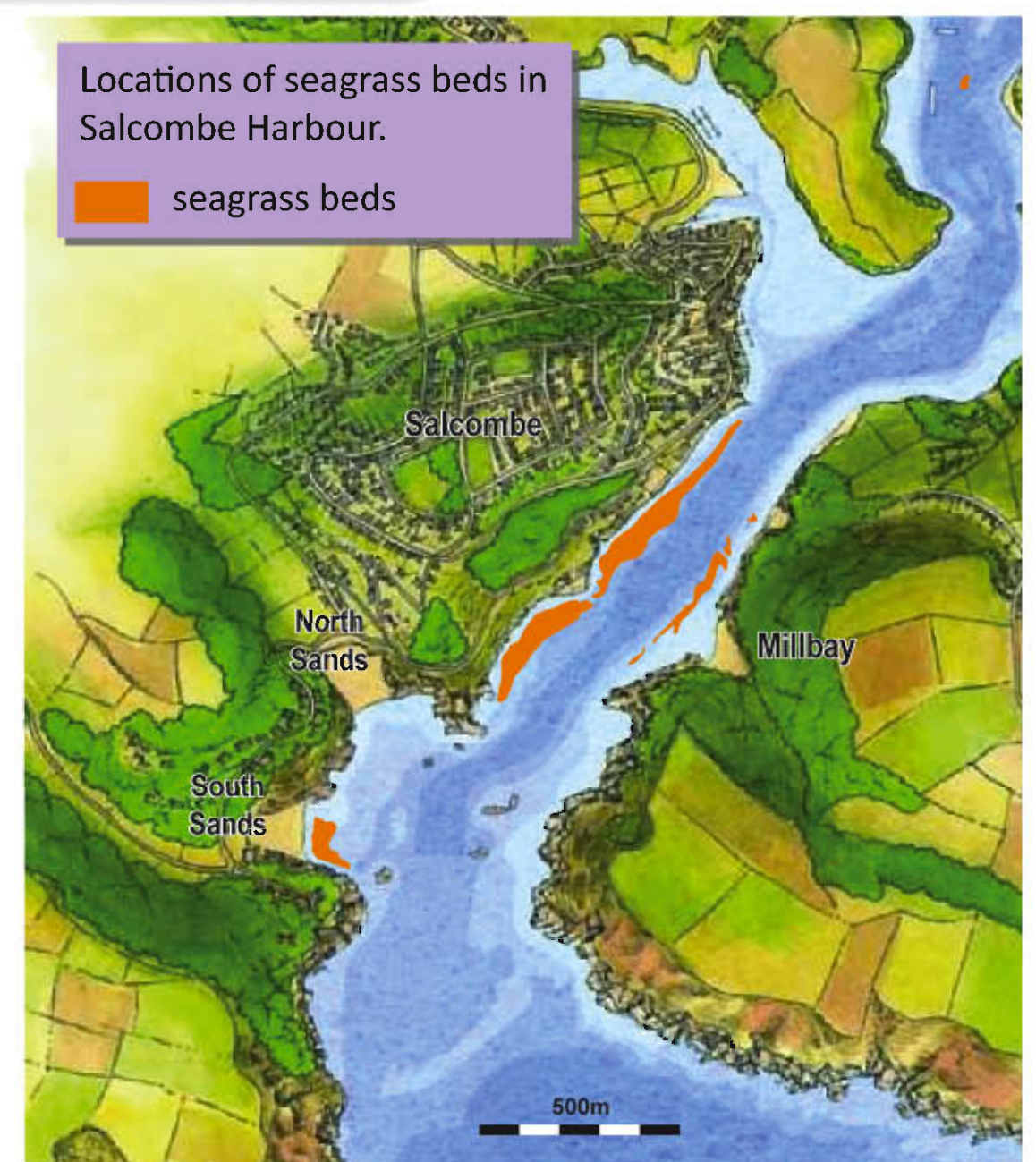
Seagrass and you

This fabulous underwater jungle is on your doorstep and, unlike many marine habitats, seagrass beds are easy to explore.

- **Snorkelling** - when the tide is in get wet and enjoy the scenery of waving leaves. 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. Always take extreme care when snorkeling amongst seagrass, keep in shallow water and make sure that you are highly visible to all boat traffic.
- **Fishing** - the fish you catch or eat may have used a seagrass bed as a nursery for its young.
- **Recreational boating** - anchors, chains and engines can tear up seagrass roots and make holes in the bed. Avoid mooring in or driving through seagrass (where the seabed appears darker) - use the oars instead!
- **Coast walking** - there is a lot to see in a seagrass bed at low tide - tread carefully and turn over leaves to see what is sheltering underneath.
- **Marine life recording** - please report marine life sightings to: www.marlin.ac.uk/rml



Scan the QR code with your phone camera for a link to the website.



Locations of seagrass beds in Salcombe Harbour.
seagrass beds

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