

Research reveals full extent of seagrass beds in Looe Bay

December 8 2020



Rebekah Noakes. Credit: University of Plymouth

Students from the University of Plymouth have led new research showing that seagrass beds in Looe Bay, on the South Cornwall coast, are

among the largest such habitats in the whole of Devon and Cornwall.

Seagrass habitats are found across the UK and play an essential role in fighting increased atmospheric carbon emissions.

Looe's large seagrass bed—which the research shows is up to 10 times larger than those in Plymouth, Falmouth and Torbay—performs an important role in the fight against climate change and, as such, requires continual monitoring to allow us to understand changes in the bed's size and health.

Developing that understanding has been the key aim of a partnership between the Looe Marine Conservation Group (Looe MCG), Cornwall Wildlife Trust and the University. The partnership's research has revealed that the seagrass beds of Looe Bay cover approximately 1.1 km² of seabed, stretching from Hannafore in the West to Millendreath in the East, and offering shelter to a diverse range of ecologically important marine animals and plants.

These include cuttlefish and stalked jellyfish, the latter being one of the reasons a 52 km² Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ) was designated in 2013. The MCZ designation also requires that the seagrass beds are maintained in 'favourable condition', enabling them to function as an essential nursery ground for commercial fish species and helping to store carbon, a vital component in tackling the climate crisis.

Rebekah Noakes led the work while studying on the MSc Marine Conservation course at the University of Plymouth. She said:

"I am extremely proud of what I have been a part of in Looe. This new information is critical for informing planning and future coastal development in the area. Seagrass beds are a vital habitat across the globe, accounting for 10% of global carbon absorption. Being able to

play a role in their effective protection, management and continued monitoring feels like a momentous achievement."

The project has combined historic and new data, in the form of underwater video footage, to build a habitat map of Looe's seagrass beds. Despite more than 20 years of previous surveys, the Looe seagrass beds have not been mapped to completion, with a gap in data between the East and West Looe sites.

In the future, LMCG Chairperson Amelia Bridges and Rebekah, who is continuing to volunteer with the group, are keen to fill this data gap by running more surveys in 2021. They are hopeful that the seagrass beds extend around the coast, making this one of the largest seagrass beds in the country, and therefore an area of conservation importance.

To establish whether this is the case, Cornwall Wildlife Trust is supporting the project by purchasing specialist underwater camera equipment to help the team map the beds further.

Amelia Bridges, chair of the Looe Marine Conservation Group and a Ph.D. student at the University of Plymouth, added: "I am absolutely thrilled that the Looe Marine Conservation Group has had the opportunity to be involved in such a fantastic and important project. Seagrass beds are crucial for the development of young commercial and non-commercial fish species and can often harbor vulnerable species such as seahorses. Using the new camera equipment, we aim to develop a scientifically robust monitoring program of the seagrass beds in the Looe Bay. This data will shed light on the health of the [seagrass beds](#) and allow us to develop local strategies to help safeguard this habitat."

Provided by University of Plymouth

Citation: Research reveals full extent of seagrass beds in Looe Bay (2020, December 8) retrieved 16 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-12-reveals-full-extent-seagrass-beds.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.