The **Helford** River
eelgrass beds

A year in the life of the
Helford eelgrass beds...

HELFORD
VOLUNTARY MARINE
CONSERVATION AREA

Dog Fish

The Helford River Eelgrass beds

A year in the life of the Helford River eelgrass beds.

*Eelgrass (**Zostera**) and its grass-like relatives are true flowering plants that grow and thrive submerged in seawater. If you walk down to Grebe beach or any other cove between Durgan and Toll Point on the north shore of the Helford River at very low tide you might glimpse the green strands of eelgrass swaying in the water just offshore. Sprouting from a sandy sea floor with occasional seaweed covered rocks, these estuarine beds are very special as they provide shelter from strong currents and predators and play host to so many different sea creatures.*

As an underwater holiday resort for marine life the eelgrass beds have a long season with the first arrivals appearing early in the New Year. The dark purple sea hares and gaily coloured sea lemons arrive in their thousands to breed. By April the sea hares have adorned the eelgrass stems with long pink strings of eggs and the sea lemons, preferring a more rigid surface, have decorated the sea floor with their pale lacelike whorls of eggs.

They are soon joined by the irresistible flashy cuttlefish, whose bodies can pulsate with rippling bands of colour as they move head to head attaching their bunches of black grape-like eggs to the eelgrass stems.

As the fish arrive the long brown cords of the quick-growing mermaid's tresses seaweed stretch to the surface and sway in the current and by mid-summer the resort is in full swing. Columns of corkwing wrasse thread their way between the leaves and shoals of small two-spotted gobies sparkle red and blue in the sun's rays. Pipefish camouflage themselves amongst the weed perhaps to be joined on rare occasions by their relative, the seahorse. Nurse hounds, those relatives of the sharks also known as bull huss, seek a safe place near rocks to entwine and anchor their egg cases which are the familiar mermaid's purses, whilst gobies and dragonets watch for any disturbance which might mean a meal!!

On the incoming tide adolescent pollack gatecrash the scene hurtling into the eelgrass and swoop low under nearby rocks in search of prawns and other tasty morsels. These are the barracudas of the temperate seas.

The roots and creeping rhizomes of the Zostera entrap and stabilise the sand and mud in which lugworms burrow and from which other bristleworms make their tubes. The sandmason worm construction has a stiff fringe to support sticky feeding threads whilst the peacock worm spreads a delicate banded fan to help its respiration and feeding.

At the height of the season the eelgrass

Seasons of an eelgrass bed

- **Spring**
  Animals start arriving, sea slugs lay eggs, topshells are active.
- **Early summer**
  Cuttlefish, fish fry, eelgrass and mermaid's tresses growing.
- **Mid summer**
  In full swing with wrasse, young pollack, pipefish and bass.
- **Late autumn**
  Leaves die back and visitors depart. Mat of debris from eelgrass and fallen oak leaves is soon cleared by storms. Despite new green shoots and young anemones it looks empty, like a resort out of season with only the "locals" around.

leaves reach a metre or more in length but by November, as the strength of the sunlight wanes, the leaves blacken, dropping amongst the dead leaves from the oak trees lining the Helford River shores and many marine visitors leave.

December gales soon clear the black decaying mat and new bright green, spiky eelgrass shoots emerge on which hosts of juvenile snakelocks anemones soon establish themselves in the beds which otherwise have the look of a resort out of season with just a few residents pottering about. However this does not last long. Come the New Year the sea hares and sea lemons will return for the new season!

Tony Sutton

Why is eelgrass important?

- Eelgrass roots stabilise sand and prevent it from being washed away
- Eelgrass beds are home to a huge array of animals including the rare seahorse
- Eelgrass beds act as a refuge for juvenile fish species such as pollack and bass
- Eelgrass beds provide important breeding grounds for cuttlefish and sea hares
- Eelgrass is rare in the UK and is declining in abundance

Snakelocks Anemones

How you can help

Boats: Anchor at least 200m from the shore and in depths not less than 7m at high water.

Divers: Take extra care over the beds and report any interesting find or damage.

Crabbers: Keep all baited pots or holding pots outside the Eelgrass beds.

☎ 01209 820441 or 01872 273939 or 01736 369817

Why is conservation needed?

By the late 1980s all the Eelgrass had been lost from the intertidal beds below Helford Passage, Treath, Calamansack and Gillan. This is why the remaining sheltered beds off Grebe beach are so important. Since 1994 these beds have been recorded and photographed as often as possible. They are being watched for signs of disease or damage, to see what animals and plants use them and whether the beds are changing. Encouraging signs are the appearance of new tufts (2005) along the North shore at Helford Passage and towards the Grebe beds. Eelgrass is a UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) habitat and species. This means that the UK Government has recognised that eelgrass is under threat and has initiated plans to protect this resource.

Please help to rescue, observe and conserve what remains ! The main eelgrass bed extends from Durgan to Toll Point off the North shore of the Helford River. Eelgrass beds are vulnerable to disturbance please avoid anchoring near them.

These beds fall within the recently designated Fal and Helford marine Special Area of Conservation (SAC). SACs are European designations selected to protect rare and threatened wildlife and habitiats both on land and at sea.

Sponsor

Thanks are due to the Cycleau Project, Interreg III B, North West Europe Community Initiative Programme funded by the European Union as sponsor of this leaflet. Also to Tony Sutton, Pamela Tompsett and Joanna Doyle for text and to Keith Hiscock, Tony Sutton and Payl Kay for photographs.

Designed and produced by The Design Team, Cornwall County Council © 2007, tel: 01872 322630. Jn P21031 May 07. Printed on recycled paper.

Sea Hare