

Main eelgrass beds in Poole Harbour



Eelgrass Do's and Don'ts –

Please:

- ✓ Do be aware of where the eelgrass beds are in the harbour.
- ✗ Don't drop anchor within these areas.
- ✗ Don't travel at high speeds that create significant amounts of wash in or near these areas.
- ✗ Don't dredge / bait drag / dig in these areas
- ✗ Don't trample the seabed in these areas.

For further information please contact:

Environmental Adviser

Poole Harbour Commissioners
(Tel 01202 440200 ext 317)

Maritime Adviser

Natural England
(Tel 01929 557450)

Further information can also be found at:

www.pooleharbouraqmp.co.uk

www.phc.co.uk

www.naturalengland.org.uk

www.pooleharbourstudygroup.org.uk

www.theseahorsetrust.co.uk

Pictures courtesy of Steve Trehwella & Mike Markey

**This leaflet has been produced by the
Poole Harbour Steering Group**

Important Information for Poole Harbour Users

Eelgrass

Please help to protect our important eelgrass beds and the marine life they support

Mooring and anchoring boats, wash from motorised craft, bait digging, dredging for shellfish & trampling can damage eelgrass beds and associated marine life in Poole Harbour

Anchorage sensitive zone where eelgrass grows



Marker Buoy



Poole Harbour

Poole Harbour is one of the largest estuaries in Britain with an enclosed, lagoonal character. The diversity of habitats and species that it holds have led to it being designated as: a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981), a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the EC Birds Directive, and a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar convention.

In the summer, Poole Harbour holds nationally important breeding populations of common tern, black-headed gull and Mediterranean gull. Between September and March Poole Harbour is home to internationally important numbers of avocet and black-tailed godwit and a total of over 20,000 wading birds and waterfowl. It is also the home of a busy commercial port and is utilised by a diverse array of user groups including yachtsmen, fishermen, and windsurfers.

There is a need to integrate the legitimate interests of all user groups with the need to secure the wellbeing of the harbour environment and the bird populations it supports. In recognition of this, the Poole Harbour Steering Group re-published the Aquatic Management Plan in 2006. One of the issues that it identified was the need to protect beds of eelgrass from damaging activities.

Eelgrass biology

Eelgrasses, although they grow in the sea, are not seaweeds. They are flowering plants. There are three species of eelgrass in the UK: common eelgrass *Zostera marina*, narrow-leaved eelgrass *Z. angustifolia* and dwarf eelgrass *Z. noltii*. Plants of all species consist of tubers and roots buried in the sediment and strap-like green leaves which stand up in the water. Common eelgrass typically grows in shallow inshore areas that are permanently covered by seawater. Narrow-leaved and dwarf eelgrass grow in intertidal areas exposed to the air when the tide goes out. All species often form extensive 'meadows'.

Eelgrass meadows are highly productive, stabilize the sediment and provide a sheltered habitat that supports a large number and wide diversity of marine organisms including many invertebrate species, cuttlefish and fish including pipe fish, wrasse and gobies. Eelgrass beds within Poole Harbour provide an important habitat for both spiny and short-snouted seahorses. Both species of seahorse are now listed on Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) and are given



Brent geese eating eelgrass

general protection under section 9 of the Act. It is an offence to intentionally or recklessly cause damage to or destroy any structure or place which seahorses use for shelter or protection. Eelgrass is also an important food resource for wintering wildfowl, which form part of the interest of the site, including brent geese, wigeon and mute swans.

Threats to eelgrass from disturbance

Eelgrasses are not physically robust. Their leaves and roots are easily damaged, and seeds can be buried too deeply to germinate by activities such as trampling, anchoring, digging, shellfish dredging and by wash from power boats and personal watercraft. Physical disturbance can lead to increased patchiness and destabilization of the eelgrass bed, which in turn can lead to reduced sedimentation within the eelgrass bed, increased erosion, and loss of larger areas.

Whilst eelgrass beds may persist in areas where disturbing activities occur, they may not be as healthy or as extensive as they might be.

Helping to protect eelgrass in Poole Harbour

Eelgrass within Poole Harbour is restricted to two main beds in the Whitley Lake area (see map). Both of these areas were identified in the Poole Harbour Aquatic Management Plan as 'anchorage sensitive zones' and they are now marked with buoys. Poole Harbour Commissioners Moorings Policy 2008 aims to phase out moorings in these environmentally sensitive areas. In the meantime, everyone can help to protect eelgrass beds and the rich plant and animal communities that they support by following the simple guidelines overleaf.



Spiny seahorse. Body up to 15cm.