

Seagrass – a no mow zone!

Jason Tickle

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A clever fisherman knows that to be successful you need to think like a fish. Only then can you understand why fish live where they do at each stage of their lives, making catching fish... easier!

Most people know that there are many habitat types on land - such as rainforests, deserts and grasslands - but many have probably not realised that there are also a wide variety of habitats in water - rocky reefs, woody snag complexes and mangrove forests for example. Fish and other animals may live in different habitats at different stages in their life, to suit their needs at the time. A healthy stock of fish therefore needs a range of healthy habitats.

One of the most important marine habitat types is the seagrass meadow. Seagrasses are unique, specialised marine plants found mainly in shallow inshore areas of bays, estuaries and coastal waters, but can also be found in deeper water when the water is clear enough.

At first glance seagrass may appear to be similar to seaweed, but it actually has more in common with the grass in your yard. Like the grass in your yard, seagrass also uses flowers, fruits and seeds to reproduce.

Seagrass may seem to be 'just grass' or 'only a weed', but seagrass meadows are thriving communities supporting many animals, such as seahorses, snails and crabs. Seagrass is also the main food for dugongs and green turtles, and is eaten by some fish.

Healthy seagrass meadows can improve water quality by slowing water currents, allowing sand and silt to settle. Seagrasses also provide essential gases for the marine environment - one square metre of seagrass can generate up to ten litres of oxygen each day. In fact, in clear water on a warm, sunny day you can actually see the bubbles of oxygen rising up out of the seagrass!

Importantly for anglers, seagrass meadows provide a nursery for many species of prawns and juvenile popular angling fish including snapper, tarwhine, yellow-finned leatherjacket, eastern blue groper, King George whiting, bream and luderick.

Seagrass meadows may appear robust, but they are actually extremely fragile. Although seagrass leaves grow quickly (as fast as 2 cm per day in summer!), their underground stems grow extremely slowly, meaning damaged seagrass meadows may take decades to recover.



Yellow-fin bream is just one of many recreational catches which uses seagrass during its life cycle.
Image: © David Harasti

Over half of the seagrass meadows in NSW have already been lost. Some of this damage has occurred naturally from extreme weather events such as storms or flooding. However more damage has resulted from human impacts such as high levels of nutrients in run-off, inappropriate coastal development and smothering with sediment from soil erosion and dredging.

Steps are being taken to reduce damage to seagrass meadows from human activities through greater protection - any activity that may harm seagrass must be pre-approved by I&I NSW.

There is plenty that fishers can do to help protect seagrass meadows too – such as not anchoring in them, using a new seagrass-friendly mooring or relocating your mooring away from seagrass, not crossing a seagrass meadow in a powerboat at low tide, avoiding digging for bait in seagrass and not walking through it at low tide.

Helping to minimise damage to seagrass meadows means not only a healthier environment, but also more fish to catch in the future.