

Sensitive Habitat (seagrass & maerl beds) Protection Zones in the Milford Haven Waterway

Sensitive habitat zone consultation and development.

In 2010, the Port of Milford Haven (POMH) consulted on the first iteration of zones to protect subtidal seagrass (*Zostera marina*) and maerl (calcareous red seaweed) beds within the Milford Haven Waterway from mooring and anchoring activity. An amended proposal went out to consultation between April and mid June 2011. This was circulated to a number of directly affected individuals, organisations and the Milford Haven Harbour Users Association which has links to marine leisure business interests including the yacht clubs. The Pembrokeshire Marine SAC Officer, Sue Burton, facilitated liaison meetings which were held at Gelliswick (Pembrokeshire Yacht Club) and Angle. The Countryside Council for Wales provided expert knowledge and advice throughout.

As a result of feedback received, including from the RYA, the Port of Milford Haven decided to pursue a voluntary agreement with users, so giving the leisure users of the Waterway the opportunity to take ownership of the issue which would then hopefully lead to a better result in terms of commitment to protection of the relevant species. The Countryside Council for Wales had advised a statutory approach, but the Port of Milford Haven preferred to generate good will of users before needing to go the statutory route. In early 2012, the SAC Officer and Countryside Council for Wales met with the Milford Haven Harbour Users Association and the most closely affected boat clubs and largely resolved how best to achieve the required conservation without unreasonably prejudicing small craft operations. It was agreed that the SAC Officer would progress the voluntary agreement, drawing up an agreement, monitoring overall progress and instigating any changes necessary.

In 2012, a Welsh Government consultation on highly protected Marine Conservation Zones (which have all since been officially withdrawn, including a very controversial zone at Dale, and further work planned) 'muddied the waters' and took up a lot of work time that year. Subsequently, completion of a final sensitive habitat zonation plan did not occur. Some pellet buoys were placed in Longoar Bay to mark out the proposed zone there, but many users dismissed them as fishing buoys. In addition, the 2012 season was plagued by poor weather which limited activity anyway. Buoys marked with 'no anchoring' have been placed there by the Water Ranger for the main 2013 season to prompt further feedback from users as to the zone's impact (or not) on continued activity. If feedback widely indicates that the preferred usable part of the Bay is compromised by the zone as marked, then we'll have to re-think what to do. At Skomer Marine Nature Reserve, they provide seasonal mooring buoys on the edge of the seagrass bed for their visitors to use. Would this alleviate the inconvenience perhaps?

The placing of the more obvious marker buoys in Longoar Bay in late July 2013 has prompted users to make enquiries. Although the sensitive habitat zone project plan has yet to be agreed and completed (apologies from the SAC Officer as it was intended to have this sorted for 2013), it has been necessary to quickly get information out to users on both the Longoar zone and wider project. Feedback from users will helpfully contribute to the completion of this plan (incorporating practical considerations like placement of markers as necessary, monitoring of activity etc.).

Who is introducing these zones and why?

The Port of Milford Haven has taken this action in accordance with its specifically agreed tasks within the Pembrokeshire Marine Special Area of Conservation (SAC) Management Scheme 2008, to help

meet its statutory requirement under the Habitats Directive to secure and maintain the favourable conservation status of the features of the SAC. Management of the SAC is undertaken by multiple authorities, as there is no single managing authority covering all interests in the marine environment. The main 'relevant authorities' formed a voluntary partnership in 1999 and employed an SAC Officer in 2000 to help coordinate their joint responsibilities. The SAC Officer has been facilitating the sensitive habitat zonation project on behalf of the Port of Milford Haven and other interests. European and UK law requires that those organisations responsible for managing the Pembrokeshire Marine SAC establish necessary conservation measures in order to ensure that certain habitats and species are maintained at, or restored to, a favourable conservation status. Therefore it is essential to prevent any further deterioration of these specific habitats and species by taking proactive action. Maerl and seagrass beds form part of these specific habitats, and mooring and anchoring activity can contribute to their deterioration.

What is seagrass and maerl?

Seagrass (the only true marine flowering plant) grows rooted in seabed muddy sands, on the shore and underwater, and can form extensive meadows. This project considers subtidal seagrass only, which is a different species to that seen in the intertidal in places such as Angle Bay.

Maerl is a collective term for several species of chalky red seaweed. It grows on the seabed and under favourable conditions can form extensive beds. Maerl is very slow-growing; deposits take thousands of years to build up. Maerl is therefore considered to be an irreplaceable resource as its growth rate is significantly less than the rate of human-induced loss.

Why are they important?

The Milford Haven maerl bed is **the only known bed of live maerl in Wales**. Seagrass is more widespread, but the Milford Haven beds represent a significant proportion of those present in Wales.

Maerl and seagrass beds are two of the most productive marine ecosystems, supporting a very high biodiversity. Their three-dimensional structures provide important habitats for many species including commercially important fish as nursery areas (e.g. juvenile bass, flatfish, and cod in seagrass beds) or as a source of brood stock (e.g. shellfish in maerl beds).

Seagrass beds reduce coastal erosion by stabilizing the seabed, increasing sediment deposition, and dissipating wave energy. As well as contributing to the oxygen that we breathe (one square metre of seagrass can produce 10 litres of oxygen per day), they are also being increasingly acknowledged as carbon sinks, playing a crucial role in absorbing the carbon dioxide we produce. The oceans currently absorb 25% of global carbon emissions, and seagrasses are estimated to 'bury' about 12% of this. Seagrasses are also nutrient sinks, absorbing nutrients and chemicals from coastal run-off. An overabundance of nutrients and chemicals can lead to algal blooms that impair water quality, however a hectare of seagrass absorbs 1.2 kg of nutrients every year - this is equivalent to the treated effluent of 200 people.

Why does something need to be done?

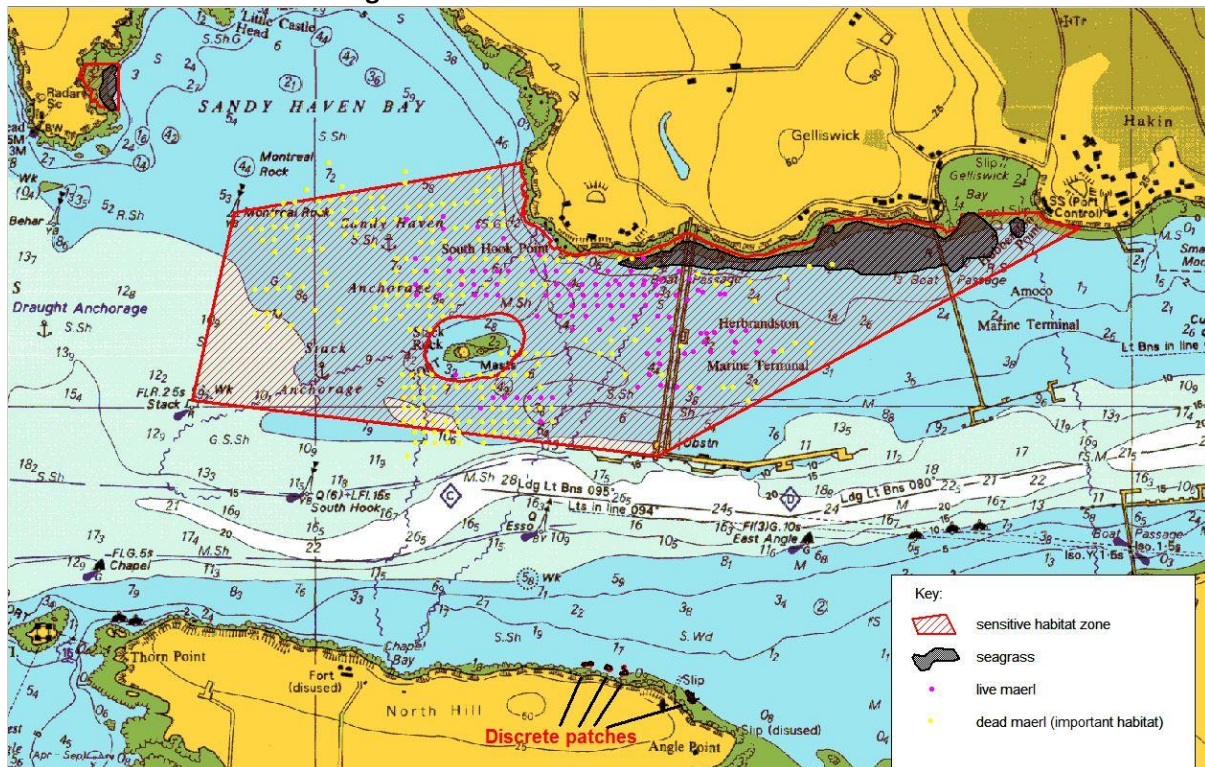
The maerl and seagrass beds in the Milford Haven waterway are impacted by human activity which has led to their decline. Increases in nutrients and silt, the introduction of an invasive non-native slipper limpet, and physical disturbance (e.g. from anchoring, mooring and fishing activity) have all adversely affected the maerl and seagrass. Existing areas are patchy, in poor condition and have reduced biodiversity. Both habitats are fragile and threatened by a wide variety of human impacts,

and are slow to recover, if at all. They have suffered substantial declines in range and abundance in Welsh waters due to both human impacts and, in the case of seagrass, disease. Other mechanisms are following up issues such as nutrient levels, siltation and damage arising from heavy industry, but limiting damaging effects from anchoring and mooring of vessels can only be successfully done by raising awareness and influencing the behaviour of users – hence this project. Most users, once they understand how their activity can be harmful, are only too happy to modify their behaviour to protect the environment.

The zones

The areas proposed for the voluntary “sensitive habitats zones” have been designed to encompass the main maerl and seagrass in need of protection whilst having practical navigational boundaries as far as possible. Stack buoy and Montreal Rock buoy mark the western boundary of the main zone. A 100m from HWM ‘buffer zone’ is drawn around Stack Rock to allow for anchoring by users. The Longoar zone is marked by temporary pellet ‘no anchoring’ buoys. GPS positions can be given for the discrete patches near Angle.

Sensitive Habitats Zones – August 2013 Chartlet



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A lot of information is available in support of this project. The SAC Officer is also involved in seagrass-friendly mooring development, and seagrass impacts research. If you have any specific queries, or can contribute in any way to this project please contact Sue Burton, Pembrokeshire Marine SAC Officer, Tel: 01646 696108, email: sacofficer@pembrokeshiremarinesac.org.uk

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