

Protect and Restore the UK's Seagrass Beds!

Executive Summary

- Seagrasses are incredibly important coastal habitats that have declined by 90% in the UK¹
- Among other things, they are vital nurseries for commercial fish stocks as well as large carbon sinks^{1,2}
- Urgent action is required to stem further losses as well as restore seagrass meadows around the UK
- Active seagrass restoration has the potential to help the UK meet its climate targets, protect against coastal erosion, and revitalize depressed fish stocks



Photo 1: One of the last few healthy seagrass and maerl beds in the UK off the Orkney Islands (WWF UK)

What are Seagrasses?

Seagrasses are underwater flowering plants that create large, underwater meadows in oceans around the world³

Why are They Important?

- Seagrasses provide a myriad of ecosystem services⁴
- They cover 0.02% of the ocean floor, but account for up to 10% of the ocean's carbon storage - one of the most valuable players in the fight against climate change¹
- They are considered “biodiversity hotspots,” containing 40 times more life than sandy bottom and acting as nurseries for commercially important fish like cod and plaice^{1,2}
- They can also protect from storm surge and stop erosion⁵!



Why the Losses?

- Higher sediment loads due to deforestation and dredging shading them out⁶
- Higher nutrient loads from fertilizer use causing harmful algal blooms⁶
- Direct dredging and anchor scarring⁶

Photo 2: A healthy seagrass meadow along with some of the fish it supports (Shutterstock)

What Should Be Done to PROTECT Seagrasses?

Problem	Solution
Maintaining high water quality standards off the coast post-Brexit	➤ Water quality metrics have improved around the UK due to EU water directives ¹ , but similar legislation must be supported once the country has left the European Union
Lack of adequate protections within protected areas	➤ Some seagrass meadows are already protected from physical (such as under the European Habitats Directive), but the protection mechanisms lack adequate enforcement ⁸ . Once the UK leaves the EU, these areas must continue to stay protected as well.
Lack of protections for much of the UK's existing seagrass meadows ⁷	➤ New marine conservation zones need to be established to guard against dredging, trawling, and anchor scarring

What Should Be Done to RESTORE Seagrasses?

Problem	Solution
Permitting processes for groups attempting seagrass restoration are too onerous ¹	➤ Legislation streamlining and easing the application and permitting process for seagrass restoration needs to be supported
Lack of financial support for seagrass restoration	➤ Seagrass restoration does cost money, though the returns far outweigh the investments. The creation of internal funding for government projects, as well as funding for collaborations outside of government should be supported

Conclusions

1. Seagrasses are incredibly important for the services they provide
2. This list of action items will work towards the recovery of seagrass systems in the UK, helping the fight against climate change, revitalizing fish stocks, and fighting erosion and storm surges



Photo 3: Seagrass restoration (WWF-UK)