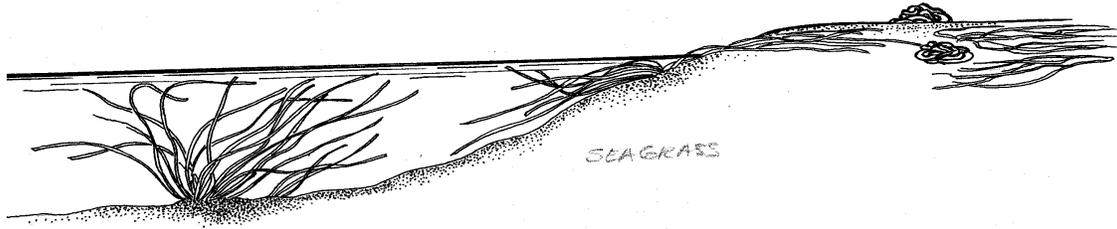


Sea-grass beds (*Zostera* spp.) Habitat statement

Inter-tidal sea-grass beds are an important food source for a number of bird species including brent goose and widgeon. *Zostera* species are higher plants with strap-like leaves and inconspicuous flowers, occurring only on the female plants. Sea-grass can be colonised by a range of micro and macro algal species. In some areas the habitat is an important nursery area for flatfish.



Current status

Three species of seagrass (*Zostera*) occur in the UK. These are; *Z. noltii*, the dwarf eelgrass, which is found highest on the shore; *Z. angustifolia*, the narrow-leaved eelgrass which is found on the mid to lower shore and seagrass, *Z. marina*, which is predominantly sub-littoral. All three species are considered to be scarce. Preferred habitats are intertidal or shallow sub-tidal sands and mud which are sheltered from significant wave action. Eelgrass is distributed sparsely around the UK's coastline with populations clustered on less exposed coasts and in estuaries.

The only location where sea-grass beds are known to exist in Suffolk is in the Estuary of the River Stour where an area covering 0.25km² was known to exist around 1997. The area is designated as a SSSI and Special Protection Area (SPA) on account of its wading bird populations.

Natural Areas

Suffolk Coast Maritime

Current factors causing loss or decline

- *Zostera* habitats are limited to intertidal sites throughout the action plan area. It is likely that the turbid nature of the estuarine water precludes any sub-tidal distributions.
- Compared with other parts of the UK, East Anglian estuaries generally receive enhanced nutrient loadings from the fresh water catchments. While this does not always have an environmental impact, where suitable solid substrates occur, blanketing growths of *Enteromorpha* can occur. Such growths could potentially impact on the *Zostera* bed in Suffolk.

Current Action

A viral infection decimated many of the *Zostera* beds around the UK coastline during the 1930s but the situation is not thought to have worsened recently. The *Zostera* population in the Stour Estuary was mapped by survey teams of the Environment Agency during 1992 and 1993. The beds are not thought to have regenerated since the viral infection and little remains of them. The Environment Agency plans to re-survey the areas in the Stour Estuary in 2004. Anecdotal evidence exists that *Zostera* is present on Nacton foreshore, River Orwell and also at Covehithe Broad in the north of the county.

Objectives for the species

- Maintain and where possible enhance seagrass beds in Suffolk

Proposed action

- Re-survey area of seagrass in Stour estuary in 2004
- Determine presence of seagrass at Nacton and Covehithe during 2005-6

Little can be done to restore the habitat in Suffolk estuaries through direct local action, due to the combined effects of viral infection and nitrate enrichment. The action plan for seagrass beds has thus been replaced with this statement. Monitoring of the Stour Estuary will continue and if the habitat shows signs of a natural recovery, the plan can be resumed.