



VILLAGE OF BELCARRA

"Between Forest and Sea"

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Protecting Bedwell Bay's Eelgrass Habitat

What is eelgrass?



Eelgrass is a common name for a group of plants called *Zostera* that grow under water in estuaries and in shallow coastal areas.

Eelgrass is neither a grass nor seaweed — It is saltwater flowering plant that can live for many years.

Why is eelgrass so important?

Eelgrass habitats are among the most productive and biologically diverse ecosystems on the planet, and provides habitat for numerous invertebrates such as Dungeness and red rock crabs (that hide in eelgrass meadows to molt), sea stars, clams, snails, anemones, and tiny crustaceans. There are twice as many species present in an eelgrass bed than on bare sand! Many fish spend a portion of their life cycle in eelgrass meadows including juvenile salmon (which shelter and feed in eelgrass beds), adult herring, pipe fish, stickleback and many more. Eelgrass meadows are important spawning grounds for herring, which in turn are a major food source for adult salmon.

Eelgrass has many valuable ecological functions:

- It helps prevent erosion and maintain stability near shore by anchoring sediment with its spreading rhizomes.
- Its leaves projecting upward have a slowing effect on water flow. This promotes deposition of suspended particles and larvae, which, in turn, increase productivity through increased photosynthesis in clearer water and larger animal populations from the settling and growth of larvae.
- Eelgrass provides food, breeding areas, and protective nurseries for fish, shellfish, crustaceans and many other animals.

Where does eelgrass grow?



Eelgrass habitats can be found on the Pacific Coast from Alaska to California. Eelgrass grows in estuaries, bays, lagoons, and other marine environments where water is clear and light is plentiful.

Eel grasses grow in shallow salty waters with muddy or sandy bottoms, and may be found growing just a few feet under water or at much greater depths if the water is unusually clear. How deep eelgrass grows depends on the amount of light available and on the clarity of the water. Temperature and salinity also affect eelgrass health.

What are the threats to eelgrass?

Almost eighty percent of the world's population lives on the ocean. As a result, most people live in areas where eelgrass thrives, in calm bays and estuaries. Agriculture, forestry, and dredging have all lead to the loss of eelgrass meadows. Boat activity, such as anchoring in an eelgrass bed, can damage the plants, and shade from docks can prevent eelgrass from getting enough light to grow.

Human activity has lead to declines in sea grasses (including eelgrass) around the world. Just south of British Columbia in Puget Sound, eelgrass beds have declined by a staggering 70 percent.

Pollution poses a great threat to eelgrass survival. Eelgrass can be a water quality indicator — which is useful in areas that are subject to pollution.

How can you help?

- Eelgrass is a very delicate plant so avoid stomping over the plants as much as possible when walking in an eelgrass bed.
- If you're in a boat and in an eelgrass bed, if possible, turn off your motor to avoid chopping up the blades of the plant.
- Do not anchor your boat in eelgrass beds as this tears-up the plants.
- Ensure that floating docks do not shade eelgrass beds.
- Do not pollute the beaches and water.
- Make other people aware of eelgrass as a critical habitat!