

Coastal Collaboration Cluster



Sea Grass Watch: A collaborative community-based habitat monitoring program

Seagrass-Watch (SGW) is an award winning, community-based, habitat assessment program established in Australia in 1998 (AMCS 2007; McKenzie et al. 2001). SGW functions as a partnership between local conservation groups, industry, government, and various other communities of interest (Finn et al. 2010). The key aim is to raise awareness of the condition and trend of near-shore seagrass ecosystems and provide an early warning for major coastal environmental changes (Finn et al. 2010). This case study relates to the SGW program operating in South-east Queensland.



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The declining condition and loss of sea grasses from natural and anthropogenic causes was a key driver for SGW in South-east Queensland (Finn et al. 2010). In particular, increasing intensity of human activity in coastal regions and associated impacts on water quality entering estuarine systems is a critical factor in this decline and loss (McKenzie et al. 2001). The combination of limited government resources for extensive seagrass monitoring and pressure from coastal communities concerned about the condition and loss of seagrass was an important factor in the establishment of the SGW in the region (McKenzie et al. 2001).

Organisational approach

SGW was developed initially through the Queensland Department of Primary Industries (QDPI), establishing and co-ordinating several steering groups to capture local enthusiasm.

The steering groups included representatives from local community organisations, Queensland Parks & Wildlife Services (Environment Protection Authority) and the QDPI. This led to early support through the first round of Natural Heritage Trust funding (NHT1). Key monitoring areas (representing a particular management focus) were identified jointly by community groups and QDPI, with community and industry groups also providing input into initial planning and ongoing monitoring (McKenzie et al. 2001).

The monitoring program utilises simple, but scientifically rigorous methods, with comprehensive training provided for volunteers. A website ensures the data is freely available to all volunteers and relevant management agencies (Finn et al. 2010). Among other uses, data from Seagrass Watch is used by the *SEQ Healthy Waterways* partnership in their Ecosystem Health Monitoring Program, supplementing water quality data (Finn et al. 2010).

The program strongly emphasises its scientific underpinnings; including consistent data collection, recording and reporting.

A wide range of associated activities are also used to engage community volunteers. For example, a seminar series on local wildlife and environmental processes involved with seagrass habitat and night time spotlighting expeditions that increase the natural history skills of participants (Finn et al. 2010).

Ongoing funding is supplied largely through *SEQ Catchments*, a regional natural resource management body. Additional funding is provided by the Ecosystem Health Monitoring Program, part of the *SEQ Healthy Waterways* Partnership, as well as industry

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representatives and a private trust. In-kind support is also made available through Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, commercial supporters and various non-government organisations (Finn et al. 2010).

Key lessons for adaptive learning

Learning outcomes emerging from the SGW program include:

- Improved monitoring capacity of coastal issues and resources that is accessible to both resource managers and the community.
- Enhanced communication pathways between government agencies and local communities.
- Improved collaboration between state government agencies in developing information for use in management plans and associated evaluation.
- Integrated community engagement including industry and commercial interests, educational facilities, NGOs and community groups.
- Community capacity and ownership building through training, experiential learning and collaboration with a range of organisations.

Final points

Seagrass Watch is an innovative and proactive community-based approach that demonstrates the value of community input in the production and application of scientific data. It also provides a mechanism by which communities can directly influence local planning and decision-making.

References

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