

STUDLAND BAY - A VISITORS VIEW

1. The Issue

Yachtsmen who visit the bay regularly have read the Finding Sanctuary reports, and are very puzzled by some of the claims made in those reports. From their own observation of the bay, often over many years of regular visits, they can see no evidence of what is being suggested in the reports. Local residents, some of whom have known the bay intimately since childhood, say the same. Since 2008 Conservation divers have tried to explain what they believe they have found. Residents have had meetings with them over the years, a lengthy Internet debate has taken place, but the perceptions of the two sides are at such variance that the argument has become very heated. It is unfortunate that from the outset some conservation divers tried to take a tough line and insists they would 'have the anchorage closed down because it is being destroyed'. Many furious exchanges have taken place on line, in the press and even on national Tv in 2011, where yachtsmen who use the bay were incensed to hear themselves described by a patron of the Seahorse Trust as 'G&T swilling Sunday afternoon sailors'. Opposing parties remain deeply entrenched.

2. Boat Owners Response Group (BORG)

BORG came in to being in 2010 after the MMO invited me to represent the interests of visiting yachtsmen at their Poole Studland bay workshops. It functions mainly through the Internet, gathering views from boat owners, and passing information back as it becomes available.

BORG was recognised by Finding Sanctuary as a Stakeholder group, and was invited to join their Dorset Coast Local Work Group, which examined the Poole Bay proposals, and drafted the recommendation for Studland pMCZ. It also works closely with SBPA and with the RYA's environmental advisors.

The great majority of yachtsmen are quite knowledgeable about the natural environment we use, and individually take considerable care to minimise any impact on the environment from our activities. Many are already very disturbed by what we can already see of the depletion of marine life in our coastal waters. In general yachtsmen welcome the MCZ initiative as long overdue, and accept that such a programme will inevitably cause us some inconvenience.

3. Anchoring - a sustainable activity?

BORG, SBPA and RYA all firmly believe that the level of anchor damage is greatly overstated. A properly deployed anchor should only cause very minor damage to the Eelgrass Rhizome mat. However we are told our anchors 'tear great chunks of rhizome mat' out, leaving large irregular holes of 3m square or more. From first hand observation, when an anchor becomes fouled with vegetation (I have experienced this twice in 35 years) only a small area is involved, in my case less than 0.3 meter. An anchor fouled with eelgrass rapidly becomes choked, and unable to cause further damage. It then slides over the surface, unable to hook in to the rhizome mat or sand, and the boat goes adrift. The anchor is unable to function and the boat drifts away towing a ball of vegetation on its anchor, which slides over the surface of the vegetation, unable to hook in to anything and so doing little further damage to the rhizome layer.

For this very reason the majority of yachtsmen actively seek to avoid anchoring in it in the first place. Many boats, my own included, now carry sonar devices similar to that used by Dr Collins, to assist in finding a clear spot in which to anchor.

BORG asked yachtsman Dr Michael Simons PhD, MRSC, to examine the evidence being presented in support of the proposed anchor ban. Dr Simons has now written two papers, which are attached:

1. [On evidence supporting the Studland Bay rMCZ](#)
2. [Eelgrass recolonisation paper](#)

4. Our findings

Dr Collins tells us *Zostera Marina* does not regenerate, and quotes as evidence studies of *Zostera Poseidana* which can take 5 years to recover from short term event damage of this kind.

Dr Simons found references in the evidence to a number of studies where *Z Marina* recovered rapidly from such events, with regrowth rates of up to a meter a year being recorded.

Dr Collins report gives no indication of the actual extent of existing damage in Studland. It examines just four sand hollows in the eelgrass, drawing conclusions about the whole 91 hectare area from it. There are also questions about the suitability and sensitivity of the equipment he used.

Yachtsmen and local residents alike know that the Bay has been a heavily used small boat anchorage since the post war leisure boating boom of the 1950's. The eelgrass far from being destroyed is still present across a large area, and users agree that anchoring is becoming increasingly difficult. Eelgrass is now present in areas that were formerly open to us for safe anchoring. This supports the view of most people who know the Bay that *Zostera Marina* is far more robust than suggested by Dr Collins, and the level of damage occurring is minor. The apparent survival of the Eelgrass bed over 60 years of regular use as a popular anchorage strongly suggests to us all there is little real cause for concern.

Of the four threats listed in the IUCN redlist for *Zostera Marina*, three are demonstrably present to some degree in the Bay, yet we can find no study of the scale or effect of these threats. Both Divers and local residents last year reported a big increase in algal growth, and an unusual sparseness of growth in the southern end of the bay. Those observing it can only speculate on the cause, but one can reasonably argue that other potentially serious problems are arising.

Some knowledgeable yachtsmen have suggested that the bare areas of seabed adjacent to fixed mooring chains, and surrounded by eelgrass, might actually have provided a favourable habitat for seahorses. The Short Snouted Seahorse is rarely recorded in eelgrass (3% of all known sightings according to SHT), so why is it here? Similarly, why are pregnant Spiny Seahorses not recorded in any other eelgrass beds? Dr Simons examined this suggestion, and using only the data provided by Seahorse Trust demonstrates that this is quite possible.

The data we believe is in places misleading, and open to re-interpretation. Both yachtsmen and Local residents have serious doubts and questions after examining it, and feel there are still fundamental issues to be addressed before any Conservation management measures can be introduced. Many of those raising these questions are themselves senior professional men from legal, medical, or scientific backgrounds, well equipped to evaluate evidence for themselves. This report embodies the main points being raised.

5. Studland as an anchorage

Studland is important to many boat owners for a number of good reasons:

a) It is a beautiful place! A great favourite for generations of boat owners, ideal for families with children, and a place to which boat owners return time and time again. For many Poole boat owners, the proximity of Studland is one of the main reasons for keeping a boat in Poole Harbour.

b) It is the UK's most important sea anchorage. There is no other sea anchorage in the UK which has so many boats visiting it regularly.

c) Safety:

i. It is one of the few places in the Central or eastern Channel in which small boats can shelter safely without entering a harbour or estuary, with their associated bars, sandbanks and strong currents. It is bounded on three sides by tidal gates, and provides an essential stop over point for boats tidebound on passage in the channel.

ii. It is an important departure point for cross channel passages. It allows boats to avoid tidal restrictions at W Solent and Poole, and is the nearest anchorage to Cherbourg, allowing a passage to be made almost entirely in daylight. It also affords shelter for inbound cross channel boats, allowing a safe landfall without any tidal restrictions, a key safety factor in passage planning.

iii. It provides an important safe 'bolt hole' for a boat experiencing difficulties which may not be sufficiently serious to call for assistance. Scenarios include minor equipment or engine problems, seasick or over tired crew. Events for which the assistance of HMGC and RNLI is not required. RNLI statistics show that unresolved minor problems at sea can escalate rapidly to a full scale emergency with loss of life or equipment.

Boat owners and the RYA have been repeatedly assured that anchoring in an MCZ area in which it is otherwise prohibited 'for reasons of safe navigation' or the saving of life at sea, will always be permitted. Most boat owners feel very uncomfortable with this definition: clearly a true emergency attended by rescue services is not an issue. The concern centres on iii above. At what point in a deteriorating situation does it become justifiable and legal to anchor?

A yacht with full fit crew will enjoy a vigorous sail in heavy weather and be entirely safe. An identical boat crewed by a middle aged man/wife team, maybe none too fit, and lacking in experience could well run in to serious difficulty if it carries on, leading potentially to loss of life. How can even an experienced skipper make a judgement call in a marginal situation, with the threat of legal action and fines if he errs on the side of caution?

A tired, frightened, cold, wet man on the edge of hypothermia, at the helm of a small boat in bad weather is in a very much more dangerous position than a dry, warm, well rested man in otherwise identical circumstances. How can legislation be framed to safely allow for this?

6. Moorings

Dr Simons report examines in some detail the claim that existing moorings are causing damage to the eelgrass bed in Studland. We conclude that the area involved is static, does not change and involves only .07% of the total area. We can find no evidence either in Dr Collins surveys or elsewhere that moorings do any harm whatsoever outside the scope of the

chain moorings. We agree entirely that any new moorings laid in the eelgrass should be of a type that does not cause damage to it.

We not only fully support, but actively promote the at present informal proposal that between thirty and fifty additional moorings of a suitable type should be provided for the use of visitors in addition to those already present, in order to help reduce any pressure the eelgrass is under.

We discussed this suggestion in some detail with Fiona McNie of Natural England, from whom the suggestion originally came, and have put it to all the main parties involved including RYA, SBPA and Seahorse Trust. All these bodies support the idea as a means of avoiding heavy legislative burdens while helping to achieve the Conservation Objectives as defined by Finding sanctuary.

7. Conclusions

BORG believes there are good reasons for creating an MCZ at Studland, and supports the idea in principle.

People who know the Eelgrass beds well at Studland, and see them regularly, all agree without hesitation that they see evidence of growth taking place in spite -+ of anchoring activity. We have all been aware recently of other issues in the area affecting the eelgrass, but we and the Director of the Seahorse Trust all agree that there is no apparent link with anchoring or leisure boat activity.

There is clear evidence that *Zostera Marina*, recovers quickly enough from short term damage events on a much larger scale than that occurring here and this prevents any overall deterioration of the eelgrass bed. If so much damage was occurring there would not be 91ha of eelgrass in the bay after 60 years of continuous use.

We believe there is therefore no reason to ban or limit anchoring in the bay. We support the suggestion made by SBPA that the main area of conservation interest should be the Central parts of the Bay, and that the anchorage area should be designated to remain fully open for recreational interests.

Unproven data sources

We are aware that there is no recorded historical data about the extent of eelgrass in the bay, or the true numbers of visiting boats each year. Conservationists have made much of the fact we cannot 'prove' our claims. But equally there is nothing to disprove what we say.. The only information available is the memory of local residents, many of whom have known the Bay since childhood, and visitors like myself who have been going there for a great many years. In the absence of any more positive information, collective memory is the only possible information source. While accepting that such data is of much lower quality, we strongly suggest it is wrong to dismiss it entirely, and that to do so leads to considerable distortion of the true picture.

In the same way we object to the exclusion of any information about Seahorse sightings other than those recorded under controlled conditions by Seahorse Trust.

Clearly collective information of this nature will not carry the same weight as properly tabulated evidence - but we believe ignoring it completely results in a much greater distortion of the overall picture. It would not occur to the vast majority of people to formally report seeing a seahorse - even if they knew how, and where to report it. The local police station?

Likewise Inshore Fishermen very frequently do not report such sightings, as they fear their fishing grounds will come under further restriction if they do.

8. The way forward?

We do not believe the Eelgrass to be under serious or unsustainable threat from anchoring activities, but acknowledging the undesirability of even minor and sustainable damage in an area of high biodiversity, we actively support the installation of a limited number of suitable moorings for visitor use in Studland to reduce the pressure on the eelgrass. DWT last year established that 60% of boating visitors would prefer to use a mooring. The option of picking up a mooring or anchoring in a suitable location should be part of an ongoing educational campaign designed to protect and support the CO's identified for this area.

We most strongly urge the review panel to consider that creating legislation to ban anchoring will:

- a) create situations in which skippers remain at sea rather than risk anchoring, leading to more serious emergency and potential loss of life. The Inshore fishing fleet say the same and state "loss of life will inevitably occur" (FS DLWG minutes Jan 2011) if the anchorage is closed.
- b) be costly and difficult to administer, and will be deeply unwelcome to all at a time of major government funding cutbacks.

We strongly urge that research in to the effects of Turbidity, Eutrophication, and Pollution be included in any future research in the bay, having observed all these to be present to some degree, and presumably affecting the bay. The presence of numerous fresh water springs in the bay is well known to local residents. Dr Collins is on record as saying salinity also affects eelgrass growth. This too needs further investigation.

Mobile VNAZ proposals

There is a proposal outlined in the FS EA report to extend the existing VNAZ area and possibly of making it mobile to give a cyclical 'rest' time to areas of eelgrass within the main anchorage area. However we believe this would only be of limited value, as it would simply increase anchoring pressure on the areas remaining open.

It would on the other hand create 'safe areas' for divers to continue their research on the seahorse habitats, and their guidance on key territorial areas of the species could be linked to the VNAZ location. SHT specify a normal range of around 200 Sq m per pair. If as part of the educational programme boat owners knew that the VNAZ contained Seahorse specimens under study, this would without doubt reinforce observance, and almost certainly lead to a self policing regime within the boating community, similar to that at Helford River Eelgrass bed. It could also provide the research divers with a safer environment in which to work! We suggest that such areas should concentrate on the central parts of the Bay.

Definitions and Acronyms

"Sea anchorage". A free anchorage not under the control of any harbour authority or within the confines of an estuary. Generally the seabed is owned by Crown Estates in these locations.

"Tidal gate" A sea area, usually coastal which displays strong currents often with an associated tide race. Only powerful vessels will be able to pass these points against the tide, and then often not in bad weather. The tidal gates bounding Studland are Portland Bill and race, St Catherines Head on the southern tip of the Isle Of Wight, and the Needles Channel. Poole harbour entrance can be difficult for a smaller boat when the tide is running hard, too, especially in onshore winds.

"Tidebound" Tidal streams even offshore in the Channel are strong enough to prevent even medium size yachts from making much headway against it. Many skippers prefer to stop and wait for the tide to change, allowing their crews to rest and feed. a waiting yacht is said to be 'tdebound'

YBW Forum is generally acknowledged as the largest of the internet boating forums with over 82,000 members. IPC Media have ensured the BORG Studland Bay page remains at the top each day, and it has received to date over 60,000 visits, with many hundreds of responses, over 98% expressing support for our work.

BORG	Boat Owners response Group
CO's	Conservation Objectives
HMCG	Her Majesty's Coast Guard
IPC Media	Trading name of Publishing group owning a range of leading Yachting Magazines.
JNCB	Joint Nature Conservation Body
MMO	Marine Management Organisation
NE	Natural England
RNLI	Royal national lifeboat Institution
RYA	The Royal Yachting Association
SBPA	Studland Bay Protection Association