

## Seahorses and Seagrass - Diving Protocols

These guidelines have been prepared to advise volunteer dive surveyors on the best practice when surveying in areas where they may encounter seagrass and seahorses. The protocol has been based on common standards for diving in environmentally sensitive areas, as well as the general Seasearch and PADI/BSAC principles of safe diving.

- Ensure there is a boat cover- bays with seagrass are often busy areas and not all boat owners may recognise a diver's marker buoy or a flag. Adequate surface cover is particularly important on busy summer days.
- Use a Surface Marker Buoy (SMB) – an SMB will allow the boat cover and other boat users in the area to safely avoid you and track your movements.
- Dive in buddy pairs- It is always safer to dive in a pair but particularly in popular recreation areas. Working in pairs will also increase the efficiency of the survey.
- Check that all of your equipment is safe, working and within test date when participating in the surveys.
- Keep on an eye on your air, time and your buddy. Maintain good communication throughout the dive with your buddy and surface safely if you encounter difficulties. The data is important but the health of the divers is more so.
- Maintain good buoyancy control - by swimming just above the seagrass and the seabed and avoiding trailing themselves and their gear in the substrate, divers reduce disturbance to the soft sediments and the seagrass.
- Keep diving gear tidy- attach loose hoses, survey equipment and other dive gear securely. This will also avoid damage to the habitat as well as preventing equipment loss which adds to the marine litter.
- To actively seek out seahorses and photograph them, a licence is required. However if a seahorse is randomly encountered by a diver, guidelines are that one or two photos without flash or other disturbance, is acceptable in order to provide a record.
- Avoid sharp, sudden changes in direction when in the seagrass- fins and the wash created by them can stir up the sediment and potentially damage the seagrass. When in the habitat, change direction slowly and kick gently. Moving with care will also help maintain the visibility.
- Keep SMBs closely reeled in to avoid entanglement with buoys – there may be many boats, permanent buoys and moorings, creating the potential for SMBs to become entangled.
- Do not pull at or hold onto the seagrass, even if you are drifting. If you need to slow down or stop, brace yourself gently on the seabed and settle carefully.
- Do not chase, disturb or touch seahorses. Seahorses are a protected species and it is an offence to disturb them. It is an exciting experience to see one but it is best for you and the seahorse to keep your distance and calmly observe. If the seahorse swims away, do not pursue it.