

TURTLES AND DUGONG FEAST ON GLADSTONE'S SEAGRASS MEADOWS

Dugongs and turtles have left a trail of crumbs at their favourite feeding sites in the Gladstone Harbour.

Their appetite for seagrass was highlighted in a recent experiment established by James Cook University (JCU) researchers.

JCU Principal Research Scientist Dr Michael Rasheed says the project confirmed the important role dugongs and turtles play in shaping seagrass condition.

“While we long suspected dugongs and turtles had an impact on seagrasses in parts of the Harbour, this is the first time we have been able to demonstrate that,” Dr Rasheed says.

“Our PhD student, Abbi Scott, established an exclusion experiment near the South Trees Inlet where dugongs and turtles were cordoned off from portions of seagrass, in a bid to shed light on food webs and ecosystem services in seagrass meadows.

“The seagrass in the exclusion zones flourished during the experiment, while the surrounding areas were devoured by hungry marine life.”

Research is also being undertaken at Pelican Banks and Rodds Bay, with initial results suggesting grazing by dugongs and turtles may be a potential contributor to seagrass declines in combination with environmental conditions and disturbances.

The project was a collaborative effort, with research partners from James Cook University, Deakin University, Griffith University, Queensland Department of Environment and Science and Gladstone Ports Corporation (GPC).

GPC Marine Scientist Dr Megan Ellis says it was exciting to be part of the research team and show that dugongs and turtles are thriving in Port Curtis.

“Dugongs and turtles are two iconic marine animals living in Port Curtis and are both a member of Gladstone’s Big6,” Dr Ellis says.

“Research into their food webs and ecosystems is invaluable in educating us on the impacts of their interactions and how we can protect them moving forward.”

GPC is proud to be an industry partner of the project, with Dr Megan Ellis also co-authoring a [paper](#) resulting from the research published in the journal *Frontiers in Plant Science*.

Similar experiments have also been established across 11 sites in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, from Lizard Island to Gladstone, with UNESCO’s Outstanding Universal Values at the forefront of research considerations.

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Fauna exclusion experiment. Photo courtesy of JCU.

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