



SEAGRASS MONITORING



This *Totally Wild* story is going to be as exciting as watching the grass grow. Yes, I'm deadly serious and I've even got a whole gang of grass-watchers joining me on the beach. Okay – we're at the coast because this grass just happens to be seagrass - and it's growing right here in sunny Hervey Bay.

Obviously there's more to this story than meets the mudflats. These grass-watchers actually belong to the Hervey Bay Dugong and Seagrass Monitoring Program. It's a volunteer project that was started nine years ago to monitor local seagrass meadows and the endangered dugongs that feed upon them. It's a very delicate habitat constantly under threat from water pollution, soil erosion run-off, heavy boating traffic and toxic algae blooms caused by waste chemicals being washed into the water by mainland rainfall.

Seagrass offers food and homes for plankton, shrimp, cuttlefish, sea-snails, crabs, fish, turtles, dolphins and seabirds as well as those dugongs. So if this seagrass dies, then the **WHOLE** ecosystem collapses with it. That's why we need these Seagrass Watchers, which includes school students using their special project kits. Now there's a real science to studying this soggy seagrass. That's why special education packs were also created for the local seagrass schools to give them all the information they need. It contains an information video, interactive CD-ROM, survey forms, booklets, maps and Seagrass Watch newsletters. Afterall, these volunteers need to report accurate results. So let's see how it's done...

The job of watching seagrass grow only takes around two hours, four times a year. Each group gets their own survey kit and their own seagrass patch to monitor. Step one is locating your site in the mud to ensure you're examining the exact same turf every visit. This is done using a GPS satellite point. Within each patch the 'watchers' lay down uniform lines of tape (called transects) then survey a square (or quadrat) of seagrass every five metres along each line.

Within each square, the group has to record what percentage of mud is covered by seagrass and algae and what condition the plants are in. They also note the seagrass species, how long the grass is, and check for any animal activity. Finally, they need to take a photo. All this information then goes into their quarterly report. All the reports from all the seagrass patches are steadily being assembled into a major guidelines manual that will be used to guide decision-making, planning and urban development within Hervey Bay.

Every three months, 300 other volunteers conduct these very same surveys on their very own seagrass patches right along the Queensland coast. It's certainly a huge task to co-ordinate but a very valuable one too. Seagrass Watch is a great way for the local school community to get behind their own environment and do something really practical to help. All the survey training is provided and you certainly don't need a science background to understand what to do. Some seagrass monitoring even involves people snorkeling over their patch at various depths.

For more information: www.seagrasswatch.org

Totally Wild Contacts:

Letterbox: GPO Box 751, Brisbane, QLD, 4001

Email: twild@networkten.com.au

Website: www.ten.com.au