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Study to provide global perspective on our seagrass

Simon Jones

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 6: Bermuda's seagrass meadows have been put under the microscope to help protect the species' global population.

The data collected during the study will be used by agencies across the world to improve conservation techniques.

And it will help bolster initiatives that are currently in place to safeguard the island's valuable seagrass population.

The two-year study focused on the damaging effects old chain moorings have on the seagrass growth.

And it came after Bermuda witnessed a 25 per cent decline in its seagrass meadows between the mid 1990s and 2004.

Scientists hope their work will raise awareness of the vital role seagrass plays in providing marine habitats as well as capturing carbon from the sea.

Researcher Dr Samia Sarkis told the Bermuda Sun the study had also demonstrated the benefits of environmentally friendly moorings.

Nursery habitats

She added: "It is becoming increasingly recognized that seagrass meadows are not only important as nursery habitats that sustain marine life in several ways, but they also have as great, if not greater capacity, than terrestrial systems such as forests, to store carbon.

"This means that their conservation is critical to reducing global warming by capturing carbon.

"This is also true for other coastal systems such as mangroves, corals and salt marshes.

"At the moment, this is a hot topic in the scientific world.

"To have Bermuda contribute data to the global network at this early stage, as well as investigate means to enhance conservation efforts currently in place to protect our own seagrass meadows, is very exciting".

Over the last two years Dr Sarkis has compared seagrass growth in areas of the island where environmentally friendly moorings are used with a site where chain moorings have caused 'halos' or bare patches to develop in the seagrass.

She was helped by the University of Virginia Environmental Science graduate Jill Greiner and the pair have taken soil and seagrass samples, which have been sent back to the US for analysis.

The results of the study will soon be shared with conservation agencies around the world.

Dr Sarkis added: "Threats to the health of this ecosystem have been identified in Bermuda and relate to recreational boat moorings and docks, the development of marinas, and the modifications of coastal zones to accommodate larger ships.

"This group of marine flowering plants form extensive meadows, covering approximately 15-20 per cent of the Bermuda platform, and are one of the most productive ecosystems in marine coastal zones."

Environmentally friendly moorings have already been installed in some parts of the island



Protecting our habitats: A juvenile black grouper is one of many species that relies on the Bermuda seagrass. *Photo by Tim Gurney



Monitoring a healthy seagrass meadow *Photo by Jill Greiner

including Hamilton Harbour and Mangrove Bay. But there is no legal requirement for boat owners to use them.

Tim Patton, who has helped install several environmentally friendly moorings across the island, said: "It would be in everyone's best interests to move in the direction of environmentally friendly moorings.

"This technology is still very much in its infancy in Bermuda.

"But it not only helps protect the seagrass meadows below the surface of the water but also provides more space above for boats."

Drew Pettit, Director of Conservation Services, added: "This study will not only provide a better understanding of the importance of seagrass on a global perspective but will contribute to the long term seagrass and conservation programme being implemented by the Department.

"Seagrass in Bermuda exists at the northern most point of its range and frontier conditions can make it hard to survive.

"Human activity, like dredging, scouring from propellers and mooring chains, can make it difficult and take longer to recover from such damage.

"Dr Sarkis's study will help us to raise public awareness and draft policy to better protect this important habitat."



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