



PROJECT SEAGRASS

Sensitive Ecosystem Responsible Fisher (SERF) Award

Criteria

Project Seagrass 2021 Version 1.0

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Picture 1. Porthdinllaen in North Wales is a strong example of where local livelihoods are closely associated to a sensitive marine ecosystem, namely seagrass.

Introduction

Within the coastal zone exist a range of sensitive marine ecosystems; seagrass meadows are one such habitat that are incredibly susceptible to damage and loss, along with habitats such as oyster reefs, kelp forests and maerl beds. Coastal communities commonly conduct activities within and around these habitats, where many people's livelihoods and well-being are linked to the benefits afforded by these marine ecosystems and the biodiversity they support. Therefore, damage to these ecosystems ultimately damages the economic and social benefits afforded by this biodiversity.

Poor fishing and boat practice has the potential to lead to prolonged and extensive damage to seagrass and other sensitive ecosystems such as oysters, maerl and kelp, however at Project Seagrass we believe that this doesn't need to be the case. Seagrass and other sensitive ecosystems can exist in relative harmony with coastal communities for mutual benefit. At Project Seagrass we believe that through knowledge sharing and communication, fishing and boating activities can occur within seagrass areas in a sustainable manner.

Although a range of fishery awards and certifications are available, these mostly focus upon the sustainability of the whole fishery in the context of Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY). Whilst we believe at Project Seagrass that such awards, and a shift towards sustainable fishing are critical for meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), they do not always link to the specific activity of fishers in the context of key marine habitats supporting marine biodiversity. Moreover, sustainable certifications can be extremely costly for artisanal and small-scale fishers that simply want recognition of activities towards sustainability. The Sensitive Ecosystem Responsible Fisher (SERF) Award provides a means of accrediting individual fishers and their licenced vessels for their behaviour towards key marine habitats, enabling individual fishers to locally market their catch in a manner that showcases their positive behaviour towards the natural environment.

This SERF Award provides additionality to existing accreditation schemes for fishery sustainability, rather than an alternative; if fishers have the sufficient capacity to seek sustainable accreditation we strongly recommend this. Many fisheries are poorly organised and, in such circumstances, individual fishers who conduct their activity in a responsible manner do not have a pathway towards profiting from such responsible behaviour through inclusion in sustainable catch

accreditation, limiting the monetary case for such responsible behaviour. The SERF award provides a means for those individual fishers in unmanaged fisheries to profit from environmentally responsible behaviour. This can potentially encourage other fishers to follow suit, potentially inspiring a fishery culture towards obtaining future sustainable accreditation.

Reasons to protect and restore sensitive marine habitats like seagrass

- Seagrass supports marine biodiversity harbouring up to 30x the number of animals than nearby bare sand.
- Seagrass provides vital nursery habitat for commercially important fish species, increasing their survival and growth rates.
- 20% of the world's biggest fisheries are supported by seagrass meadows.
- Seagrass meadows help reduce coastal erosion.
- Seagrass can filter coastal water, making it cleaner for recreational and fish collection purposes.
- Seagrass meadows can rapidly absorb and store carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, helping to fight climate change.

Aims

1. Enhance the conservation of seagrass meadows and other sensitive ecosystems.
2. Promote and enhance responsible fishing activity in proximity to seagrass and other sensitive ecosystems.
3. Provide a means of improving the revenue of fishers contributing to the conservation and restoration of seagrass and other sensitive ecosystems.
4. Improve the awareness of the value and conservation needs of seagrass and other sensitive ecosystems.

Award limitations

Although the aims of this award are to promote the responsible behaviour of individual fishers, **this award does not in any way verify the sustainability of a whole fishery or the sustainability of the fishers' activities.** The Marine Stewardship Council are the appropriate body for providing such sustainability assessments and awards (see <https://www.msc.org/uk>).

Contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals

At Project Seagrass we believe that achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) requires all industries to play their part and contribute. This SERF Award actively contributes towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's), in particular [SDG14 to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development](#). By aiming to foster responsible fishing activities in and around sensitive coastal ecosystems the SERF Award contributes to the following sub targets:

1. Target 14.1 – The SERF Award aims to reduce plastic and other forms of marine pollution as well as ensuring that fishing gear does not enter the ocean (see advice guides, 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7)
2. Target 14.2 – The SERF Award focuses on reducing the harmful effects of boat and fishing practices to sensitive coastal ecosystems to strengthen resilience and support restoration activities.
3. Target 14.4 – The SERF Award uses science-based knowledge transfer to ensure that fishers act responsibly towards nursery ecosystems that contribute to sustaining fish stocks.
4. Target 14.b – The SERF Award provides small-scale fishers with environmental accreditation enabling them to market their catch locally under the SERF brand.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS





Picture 2. Sensitive marine habitats in the UK (Source: Unsworth, WWF).

Potential Rewards to fishermen

- Following the codes of conduct for fishing around seagrass could in the long-term improve the health of the seagrass and ultimately lead to increase yields.
- Following codes of conduct on pollutants will improve overall ecosystem health, including improving survival and growth of fish, therefore boosting the sustainability of stocks.
- Improved health of seagrass meadows – a nursery ground for many commercially valuable species of fish.
- Creation of the ‘SERF Award’ brand helps assure top quality sustainable produce and price of catch.
- Media coverage of ‘SERF Award’ brand and potential of media to positively target individual fishers.

Pilot scheme

The roll out of the SERF award requires validation of the mechanism of the scheme in terms of how to validate its effectiveness, the benefits of the criteria for the environment, marketing

success and the assurances surrounding fisher adherence to rules. This period of the scheme (April 2021 until Dec 2022) is a pilot period for the scheme with one initial fisher registered. Six monthly meetings will be held with the pilot award holder (s) to reflect upon the success of the pilot and determine ways in which the award can be modified and improved. An external expert reviewer will be invited to review the award during the initial six months (before Oct 2021), and then at the end of 2022 to provide feedback as to a pathway to developing a planned award structure.

Initial pilot scheme timetable

April 2021: Scheme launch

April 2021: Commence social media reporting of activities

July 2021: External scheme review (desk based)

October 2021: award holder feedback

March 2022: award holder feedback

Dec 2022: award holder feedback

Dec 2022: External scheme review (site based)

Assurance and feedback

Creating any level of environmental award requires establishing a publicly visible mechanism for validating the recipient behaviour so that trust develops as to the strength of the award. A mechanism is also required to ensure that inappropriate behaviour if undertaken and/or observed is reported. The following processes are being established that will ensure this trust in the scheme can be assured.

- Detailed initial discussion about the award criteria with the fisher (s).
- Agreement (see Appendix 1) together with a certificate signed by all parties as to their knowledge of the award and their intention to adhere to the award criteria.
- Regular (every two weeks) visual reporting (using social media) of active behaviours in fulfilment of the award criteria including the archiving of this material for 6 monthly submission to Project Seagrass.
- Six monthly discussion meetings between Project Seagrass and award recipient.
- A reporting mechanism for members of the public to use to report behaviours inconsistent with the award criteria.
- Independent award inspection.
- Spot visits by Project Seagrass.

As a key part of the creation of media coverage around this award and to provide public assurances of the adherence to the code, the recipients will be expected to routinely share photos of examples of their good practice for sharing on social media channels using the hashtag #responsiblefishing. Recipients will be required to be subjected to auditing of their activity every 2 years to ensure they are following the code. An application process vetted by evidence and site inspection will be required for individuals to obtain this award.

Project Seagrass is the sole owner of the rights to this award and reserves the right to remove this award from any individual found not to be adhering to the code.

Award Criteria

All fishers given the SERF award will be required to take an applied role in seagrass conservation and/or restoration and agree to adhere to the following code of conduct:

1. Be aware of the location and distribution of seagrass and other sensitive marine ecosystems (kelp, maerl, oysters) in their fishing area and commit to share this knowledge with other local fishers. Referring where appropriate to local guidance from marine conservation and management bodies, where possible obtain the layers to upload them onto a chart plotter.
2. Do not anchor on seagrass or other sensitive marine ecosystems, always look to anchor on bare sandy sediments if necessary.
3. Be aware of marker buoys for any local seagrass meadows or other sensitive marine ecosystems, keeping a distance between them and your vessel when possible.
4. Do not use towed bottom fishing gear in or around seagrass and other sensitive marine ecosystems.
5. Avoid placing catch or storage pots directly on seagrass for extended periods (more than 48 hours).
6. When netting in and around seagrass and other sensitive marine ecosystems, avoid using weights and gears that snag on and rip seagrass.
7. Don't bait dig near or on seagrass and other sensitive marine ecosystems. Please refer to local guidance where possible.
8. Where mooring boats in seagrass and other sensitive marine ecosystems is unavoidable, consider using an Advanced Mooring System or a Rope Mooring (no chain).
9. Manage your boat mooring in a manner to avoid damage to seagrass and other sensitive marine ecosystems (e.g. movement during servicing) and where possible replace with a system less damaging (e.g. rope or Advanced Mooring System).
10. Act responsibly with the management and disposal of fuel, oils and other pollutants such as sewage to avoid polluting seagrass (see advice guide 1).
11. Clean your vessel in a manner sensitive to marine wildlife including seagrass and other sensitive marine ecosystems (see advice guide 2).
12. Take care when using anti-fouling paints (see advice guide 3).
13. Take measures to reduce emissions from boat engines (see advice guide 4).
14. Take measures to avoid any release of any form of marine litter (see advice guide 5).
15. Take measures to reduce use of harmful anti-fouling paints (see advice guide 6).
16. Follow guidelines to ensure that fishing gear is not lost and doesn't become ghost gear (see advice guide 7).
17. Avoid spreading invasive species (see advice guide 8).

18. Take measures to avoid (where appropriate) impacts on large marine animals (see advice guide 9).
19. Avoid damaging seagrass with your boat or engine. When moving through seagrass areas do not create wash with your engine and ensure you are sufficiently aware of the tides and depths so as not to ground your boat on seagrass at low tide or catch your engine propeller in the seagrass.
20. Adhere to all local by-laws and rules with respect to fisheries management, specifically catch limits, species, by-catch, gears, sizes and closures.
21. Conduct at least one seagrass conservation and education activity each year, for example, supporting on water conservation or restoration activities, or leading education activities with local children about marine biodiversity.

Picture 3: Boating activities when conducted in an irresponsible manner can damage seagrass (right), but this needn't be the case as solutions such as rope moorings for boats don't damage seagrass (source Unsworth).



Advice Guides

Advice guide 1: Oils and fuels

- Check the bilge is free from oil before pumping.
- Install an in-line bilge filter to remove oil when pumping out bilge water.
- Use an absorbent sock to control oil and fuel in the bilge.
- Make sure you use a large enough funnel if you have to refuel on-board.
- Maintain fuel lines, connections and seals to avoid leaks.
- Transfer waste oil and fuel in proper containers.
- Remember that oily or fuel-soaked materials are considered hazardous waste so dispose of them in appropriate facilities.
- Avoid overfilling the tank and allow room for the fuel to expand.
- Never use detergent to deal with spills – it may disperse the fuel or oil
- On shore try not to use oil and fuel within ten metres of the water.
- Use a fuel collar to catch drips or blowback when refuelling.

Exposure to oil can reduce growth in mature fish, impair reproduction and adversely affect eggs and larval survival. Abiding by these codes can therefore increase the size of your catch as well as contribute towards boosting the stock in the long term = greater yield and greater profit from catches.

Find your nearest UK oil bank and dispose of your waste engine oil responsibly @ <http://www.oilbankline.org.uk/>

Advice guide 2: Sewage disposal

- Only use sea toilets in the open sea where waste will be quickly diluted and dispersed – not near the seagrass.
- Always use pump-out facilities where available.
- If you have to empty your tanks only do so more than 3 miles offshore.
- Take extra care in areas of poor tidal flushing, such as marinas, or where there are shellfish beds. Use shoreside facilities where possible.
- Chemical toilets must be emptied ashore into the regular sewage system. Plan ahead – they can be difficult to carry and few pump out facilities will accept chemical toilet waste.
- Consider fitting a holding tank to your boat, it is law in some European countries.
- Always give consideration to the environmental sensitivity of the area before using your sea toilet.

More information @ <https://www.rya.org.uk/knowledge-advice/environmental-advice/Pages/waste-management.aspx>

Advice guide 3: Cleaning vessels

- Choose environmentally friendly products for cleaning and maintaining your boat. Avoid chlorine, bleach products and phosphates in particular.
- Use non-toxic solutions wherever possible, water and elbow grease are great! Waxing your hull keeps you fuel efficient and reduces the need for cleaning products.
- If cleaning the hull of your boat, only scrub off the fouling and not the underlying paint – be careful not to let waste material enter the water or run into surface water drains.
- Toxic cleaning products can lead to increases in algae and 'dead zones' in areas of excessive use and improper disposal. Dead zones are depleted of oxygen, directly impacting the fish stocks and other wildlife. Again, abiding by these codes can help boost the yield of your catch and profits

Information and products on sustainable boating @ <http://www.sailinglog.net/green><http://www.sailinglog.net/green>

Advice guide 4: Cutting exhaust fumes

- Regularly service your engine to lower fuel costs and emissions.
- Use CE marked outboard engines manufactured after 2005 or electric engines to increase fuel efficiency, reduce noise and decrease emissions.
- Consider an electric powered craft. They have low emissions and are very quiet.
- Try switching to biodegradable hydraulic and lubricating oils.

More information @ <https://thegreenblue.org.uk/you-your-boat/info-advice/engine-efficiency/>

Advice guide 5: Marine litter

- Don't throw anything over the side, including food.
- If you smoke, keep a butt tin in your pocket for cigarette ends.
- Use compostable rubbish bags for waste. Prevent loose items from blowing overboard.
- Prevent chemicals entering the water by using products which contain natural ingredients.
- Remove excess packaging and recycle it at home.
- Recycle more - most marinas, clubs and harbours now have recycling facilities for you to use. Alternatively recycle items at home or take them to your local refuse centre.
- Reduce waste, avoid using single use plastics where possible, e.g. refill re-usable bottles instead.
- Don't contaminate general waste by throwing hazardous items in the wrong container e.g. paint tins, oily rags and old electronic instruments.

More information @ <https://www.recycle-more.co.uk/>

Advice guide 6: Anti-fouling paints

- Prevent anti-fouling from unnecessarily entering the water. Catch scrapings and drips by skirting the hull and using a tarpaulin. Don't leave a coloured patch under your boat!
- Check your drains - avoid applying and removing antifoul near rainwater drains where paint and scrapings can directly enter the local environment.
- Only scrub off the fouling and not the paint. Be careful not to let the debris enter the water.
- Encourage/check with your marina to collect and properly dispose of wash down residues.
- Select the right antifoul for you, choosing the lowest levels of biocides and copper suitable for your needs.
- Contact your paint supplier for more information on the best type of antifoul for your boat and level of usage
- Use low VOC (Volatile Organic Compounds) where possible.
- Look into more environmentally friendly, non-toxic, foul release technologies such as Vinyl or Silicone.

For more information visit <https://thegreenblue.org.uk/you-your-boat/info-advice/water-pollution-prevention/antifouling/>

Or

<https://www.rya.org.uk/knowledge-advice/environmental-advice/Pages/antifouling.aspx>

Advice guide 7: Prevention of abandoned, lost or discarded fishing gear (ALDFG)

- Mark gears and storage with the port letters and numbers (PLN) of your vessel.
- If you cannot retrieve your lost gear, you must inform the UK fisheries authorities within 24 hours.
- Cash reward scheme available in some areas for finding and handing in ALDFG.

More info @ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/markings-of-fishing-gear-retrieval-and-notification-of-lost-gear>

Advice guide 8: Awareness of invasive species

- It is good practice to regularly bring your boat ashore to clean and remove any fouling from your boat and equipment e.g. hull, rudder, propellers, fenders and ropes, to prevent the spread of aquatic Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) around our coastal waters (e.g. *Sargassum muticum*).
- Avoid sailing or motoring through weeds if possible. This can chop them up and spread them further. If caught up on the hull or propeller, invasive alien species can be transferred to another area.

More information @ <https://www.rya.org.uk/knowledge-advice/environmental-advice/Pages/invasive-non-native-species.aspx>

<http://www.nonnativespecies.org/factsheet/factsheet.cfm?speciesId=3141>

Advice guide 9: Awareness of marine mammals & other wildlife in meadow/bay

- Slow boat down when close to a meadow or sensitive ecosystem.
- Think speed, and be steady, predictable, quiet and cautious around marine wildlife. This is the rule of thumb whether you spot something in the distance, whether something pops up on the port side, whether you use a smaller craft that can reach shallower depths or whether your passage takes you by seals hauled out on rocks or colonies of roosting birds on the cliff edge.
- E.g. seals, dolphins, otters/

More information @ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/protected-marine-species>

Advice guide 10: Direct damage to seagrass

- Do not sail or motor through seagrass meadow. Be aware of marker buoys for the meadow, keeping a distance between them and your vessel.
- Do not anchor on seagrass, always look to anchor on sandy sediments if necessary.
- Consider using advanced mooring systems.

More information @ <https://www.rya.org.uk/knowledge-advice/environmental-advice/Pages/anchoring-and-mooring.aspx>

Appendix 1. SERF Award Agreement form



I.....owner of licenced fishery vessel.....

agree to abide by the rules of the Sensitive Ecosystem Responsible Fisher Award ran by Project Seagrass as set out in their document ' SERF Award Scheme structure' dated April 2021. As part of my commitment to this SERF Award I also agree to become positive ambassador for the importance of marine conservation and restoration.

I.....have read, been made aware of and understand the complete details of the award as set out in their document ' SERF Award Scheme structure' dated April 2021.

Name of Fisher.....

Signed.....

Date.....

Project Seagrass Director Name

Signed.....

Date.....