

# Eelgrass

## SNOHOMISH COUNTY MARINE FACT SHEET

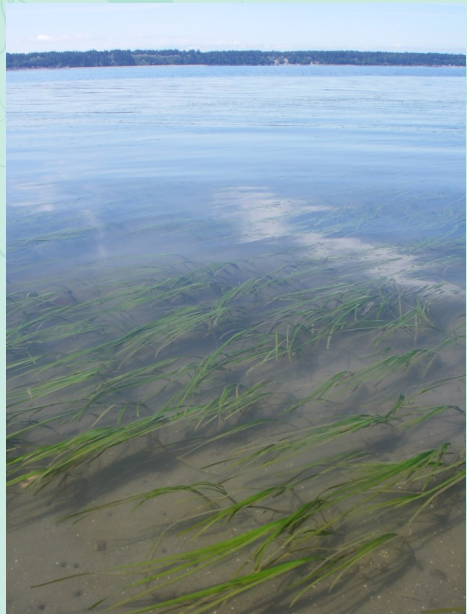
As its' name hints, eelgrass (*Zostera Marina*) is a species of grass. Though commonly thought of as a type of seaweed, eelgrass is actually a vascular plant that produces flowers and utilizes rhizomes (roots) to extract nutrients from the sediment. Eelgrass typically spreads with new shoots springing up from rhizomes, but can disperse by seeds as well. Large eelgrass meadows form in the shallow, subtidal zone. These plants prefer to grow on muddy or silty bottoms, and so are especially common in estuaries. As perennial plants, they grow during the spring and summer, and decay in the fall and winter. Eelgrass beds provide important habitat for a number of marine species.

### Did you know?

Herring, a species of forage fish, lay eggs on eelgrass blades!

### Who lives in eelgrass?

Eelgrass hosts an abundance of marine invertebrates and vertebrates; providing shelter and food for many species including herring, juvenile salmon, Dungeness crab, and gunnels. Bacteria, diatoms, and detritus-eating invertebrates (amphipods, isopods, polychaete worms, brittle stars, some mollusks, etc.) are attracted to the eelgrass beds and then become food for a number of species. Eelgrass leaves, when they die, provide an abundant food source for bacteria and fungi, helping to start the cycle over again.



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## Why is eelgrass important?

While eelgrass is home to marine species of all sizes, it is also valuable for protecting infrastructure along the shoreline. Eelgrass meadows cushion the impact of waves and currents while roots hold sediments in place to prevent erosion. This helps reduce erosion in places where eelgrass is abundant.

## Threats

Washington State has lost over 30% of its native eelgrass beds. Eelgrass is threatened by multiple sources:

- **Dredging** may uproot seagrass beds, stir up sediments, and affect water quality
- **Shoreline construction** produces shade that stunts growth of eelgrass plants and can increase erosion
- **Logging** upstream releases sediments that flow into estuaries and can smother eelgrass
- **Oil spills** cause eelgrass plants to lose their leaves
- **Invasive species** place stress on native species by crowding and displacing.



## Resources

- Snohomish MRC: [www.snocomrc.org](http://www.snocomrc.org)
- Port Townsend Marine Science Center Eelgrass Factsheet
- Washington Department of Ecology: [www.ecy.wa.gov](http://www.ecy.wa.gov)
- Plants of the Pacific Northwest Coast, Jim Pojar and Andy MacKinnon, Redmond, WA 1994

## How you can get involved

The MRC is a citizen-based volunteer committee appointed by the Snohomish County Council. It is one of seven county-based MRC's, which conduct restoration, conservation, and education projects with diverse partners and community members to meet performance benchmarks.

