



Seahorse Tagging Project at Studland Bay in Dorset



The Seahorse Trust has been surveying British Seahorses since 1994 through its British Seahorse Survey and in early 2008 we achieved the full protection of both species under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981). This monumental breakthrough took six years to obtain and it also included the protection of the habitat the Seahorses are found in, which was a bonus to the protection.

The British Seahorse Survey would not be possible without the community involvement we receive through the hundreds of sightings per annum from divers, fishermen and the general public. This very community involvement has made it possible to get the two species; the Short Snouted Seahorse (*Hippocampus hippocampus*) and the Spiny Seahorse (*H.guttulatus*) protected under the wildlife and Countryside Act as named species (including the habitat they occupy) and has meant that hundreds of people have given up time and energy to go out looking for Seahorses and reporting them into us. This amazing influx of information has allowed us to build up a picture of the unique lives these two species we have in our coastal waters.

Ongoing research

The British Seahorse Survey was set up in 1994 and is the longest running survey of its kind in the world; it's this longevity that has allowed us to gain a greater insight into the world of two of the British Isles most enigmatic species. Through its research work the trust has been monitoring a number of sites around the UK, one of which is in Studland Bay in Dorset. Our coordinators for Dorset Steve Trehwella and Julie Hatcher discovered Seahorses on the site in 2005 and since then we have made a number of amazing discoveries about British Seahorses and particularly this site. Despite the longevity of the survey and the amount of knowledge we have already gained we need to know more about these very elusive animals and their secretive lives and Studland Bay gives us a unique opportunity to do this.

Tagging and monitoring the Seahorses

Over several years in conjunction with aquaria around the UK especially the Sealife Centre in Weymouth we have learned to tag Seahorses with a small 'floy' tag that is non intrusive and does not affect the lives of the seahorses. We propose to tag the Seahorses at Studland Bay so that we are able to identify individual Seahorses. During the tagging process we will take notes of measurements, identifying marks, GPS location, sex and photographs to allow us to build up a database of individuals on the site, all of which will be updated as and when these individuals are spotted again. It is aimed that we try to dive at least once a week on the site throughout the year to gather ongoing data and information allowing us to know more about the unique residents of the bay. These dives will allow us to check on existing tagged Seahorses and to tag new ones, as part of this tagging process the exact location of each animal will be taken by GPS. The tagging project is expected to be ongoing for a number of years and like the survey will allow us to build a greater picture of what is going on in the wild; as Studland is very unique in having a large population of Seahorses and it is easily accessible for diving. We are hoping that the study of the Seahorses in Studland will be ongoing and will include the local community in helping us with our work; this we hope will instil local pride in this very special area. The data we gather will allow us to put together with interested parties such as Natural England, The National Trust and Dorset Wildlife Trust a management plan which will include public information schemes and seagrass bed regeneration plans.

PADI speciality in Seahorses

As part of the survey work we hope to include volunteer divers and at present there is a speciality course being talked about by PADI Aware and Lucy Woodall who is studying the genetics of European Seahorses, so as part of the work we also hope to be able to train divers in this course which in turn will allow them to go and study Seahorses under our guidance elsewhere.

Licensing

Licenses are already held by The Seahorse Trust and Steve Trehwella. Julie Hatcher and John Newman are agents of the trust and come under our license. This license has been issued to allow us to work with Seahorses in captivity and in the wild and allows us to monitor and mark the Seahorses as appropriate. We will also be applying for a separate license to cover us solely for the Studland project.

Contact details

Neil Garrick-Maidment
Director
The Seahorse Trust
Reg. office: 36 Greatwood terrace
Topsham
Devon.
EX3 0EB

e-mail: neil.seahorses@tesco.net

Tel: 01392 875930
01404 822373
07876513628

websites: www.theseahorsetrust.co.uk
www.britishseahorsesurvey.org

Project costings

These costings will be per annum and we hope to run the project for at least 3 years.

Projects Officer salary	£28,000	
Office rent and costs	£ 3,500	
Telephone	£ 600	(approx)
Electricity	£ 500	(approx)
Stationary (including partial leaflet costs)	£ 1,000	(approx)
Travel	£ 3,000	(approx)
Divers air	£ 156	
Dive equipment maintenance	£ 1,000	
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TOTAL	£37,756	