

Kids' pages

Winter 2022 issue

Q Is seagrass and seaweed the same thing?

A Plants are very diverse. Just like land plants, aquatic plants (those that live in water) can be very different.

Seagrass and seaweed are similar in some ways. They both photosynthesize just like land plants, and they both play an important role in an ecosystem, providing food and habitat. However, though their names and appearance are similar, seagrass and seaweed are not the same thing. In fact, they are very different.

Seaweed is a nickname for a group of alga. It is any of the red, green, or brown algae that grows in the sea/ocean. Most alga, including seaweed, are not even considered plants. Though similar to plants, alga lack roots, stems, leaves, and other

important structures of a plant. There are many different species of seaweed and they can be found fixed to the seafloor or floating in the water.

Seagrasses are true plants and are very similar to land plants. They have long, grass-like leaves, flowers, seeds, and roots. The only difference is, they grow underwater. They are the only living plant that can live entirely underwater.

Here in Tampa Bay, we have three common species of seagrasses: shoal grass, turtle grass, and manatee grass. Seagrass is a critical habitat in the bay, providing a nursery and home for many animals. It is also an important food source and improves water quality in the bay.

Sources: Florida Fish and Wildlife, Florida Gulf

Coast University, Florida Oceanographic Society, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Smithsonian Institution, The National Wildlife Federation, University of Hawai'i at Manoa, University of Florida, Virginia Institute of Marine Science, ABC Science



Shoal grass



Turtle grass



Manatee grass

The three common species of seagrasses found in Tampa Bay.



Algae growing among seagrass.



Above, the Grass Porgy is well camouflaged in its environment.

MEET THE

Grass Porgy

The grass porgy is a pale, olive brown fish with dark blotches forming vertical bars along its body and a dark spot just behind the gills. It has a compressed body, humpback shape, a deep snout, and a forked tail. The grass porgy gets its name from its habitat, residing in inshore seagrass beds of coastal waters. It is very well camouflaged in its environment with its unique patterns.

SIZE: Up to 10 inches

DIET: Feed mainly on invertebrates such as worms, clams, snails, and sea stars and sea urchins.

DISTRIBUTION: Western Central Atlantic and Eastern Gulf of Mexico

The grass porgy is usually solitary, but can be found in small schools. It has a variable diet and uses its strong teeth to crush the shells of its prey. It is only found in the Western Atlantic and maintains a thriving population of least concern.

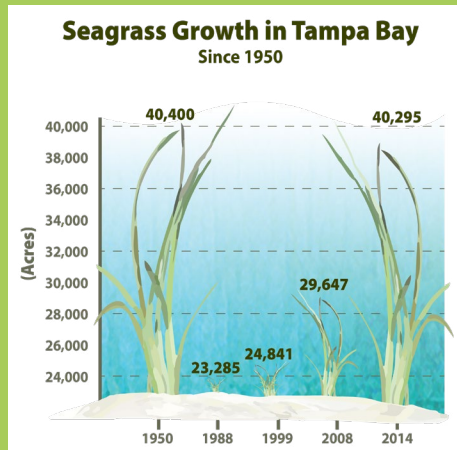
Sources: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Pro Angler; Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute; Reef Flex

Seagrass: A Comeback Story

Seagrass growth has experienced some hardships here in our estuary. Read below for the history of seagrass in Tampa Bay and what is being done now to protect this important habitat.

Decades ago, the Tampa Bay estuary looked a lot different than it does today. Back then, there were not many laws in place for proper disposal of wastewater from homes and businesses. Most of this dirty water was dumped directly into Tampa Bay, which caused nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus to enter the environment. These nutrients acted like a food source to algae living in the bay, causing it to grow in large mats covering the surface of the water. The seagrasses living at the bottom of the estuary

were blocked from the sun, which caused most of them to die off because they could no longer use the sun for photosynthesis. With Tampa Bay's seagrasses in distress, the entire bay ecosystem suffered: invertebrates, fish, and wading birds no longer had a place to live or find their food. Luckily, once people started to realize how dirty the bay had become, they decided to take action! New laws were passed so that wastewater had to be thoroughly cleaned before flowing into the environment. Also, organizations





like Tampa Bay Estuary Program were created with the goal of restoring these seagrass habitats to sustainable levels. Today, Tampa Bay Watch has helped this organization maintain 34,000 acres of healthy seagrass across the bay!


Sources: Smithsonian Ocean, Tampa Bay Estuary Program

Fun Facts

 There are nearly 52 species of seagrasses worldwide and only seven species are found in Florida waters.

 Most seagrass species grow in the water between 3ft-9ft because they need enough sunlight in order to grow.

 Sargassum is a type of seaweed that floats in island-like masses in the Atlantic. Sea turtles spend the first few years of their lives in the Sargasso Sea eating Sargassum.

 Generally, manatees will eat one-tenth (1/10) of their body weight in plants every day. A manatee that weighs 1,000 pounds eats nearly 100 pounds of food per day.

Sources: Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Tampa Bay Estuary Program, The Turtle Island Restoration Network, University of Florida

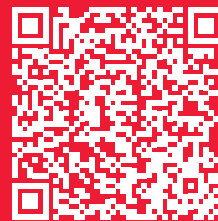
Sustainability Tip



All drains lead to the ocean!

Remember that storm drains on streets and sidewalks flow directly into the bay. Be sure to throw your trash in a trash can and limit fertilizer/pesticide use on plants and grass so no pollution washes into the estuary.

Try something new!



Scan this code for a fun at-home activity!

Source: Teach Ocean Science

TAMPA BAY WATCH



Restoring the Bay Every Day

Kids' Pages is a quarterly newsletter supplement to the Bay Watch Log. Please get your kids involved and sign them up to be a member today! Email membership@tampabaywatch.org or visit tampabaywatch.org.