

UNDERWATER LAWNS

SEAGRASSES

Seagrasses, unlike seaweed (algae), are true flowering plants with stem, leaves, roots and flowers that live under the sea. They tend to grow in shallow water, usually less than 15 meters deep, where the sunlight penetrates well. Seagrasses are found in well sheltered, soft bottomed marine coastlines and estuaries and were probably given their name because many of them have ribbon-like grassy leaves.



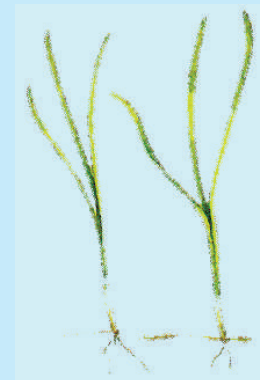
Thalassoden ciliatum

There are about 58 species of seagrass worldwide, with five known species growing in the Varanus - Montebello Islands region. The coastline of Western Australia has the greatest diversity of seagrasses in the world and some of the meadows formed are amongst the largest on earth - for example the largest single meadow found in Shark Bay is estimated to be 1,000 square kilometres. This is due partly to the offshore reefs protecting the coastline and partly because of the clearness of the waters. Unfortunately, the seagrasses around the Montebello and Lowendal Islands are quite sparse.

Like flowering land plants, a seagrass plant reproduces by producing pollen which attaches itself to other flowers and fertilises it to produce seed. They do this all underwater with pollen drifting in water currents until they collide with a flower.

Seagrasses play an important role in the ecology of coastal waters. As well as providing marine life with a vast source of food this role also includes:

- the stabilising of offshore sand banks and bottom sediments with their roots and horizontal stems;
- helping the physical reduction of wave and current energy;
- providing a breeding ground for many fish; and
- providing a nursery for crabs, prawns and juvenile fish.



Halodule uninervis

The western rock lobster spends three years of its youth in the seagrass meadows. Herring originate in the seagrass beds and a lot of fish feed on the molluscs, filter feeders, shrimps, crabs, starfish, worms and urchins amongst the seagrasses.

The green turtle and dugong graze in the seagrass meadows. Decaying seagrass leaves provide a bountiful food for small creatures such as bacteria, worms and crabs.



Halophila ovalis