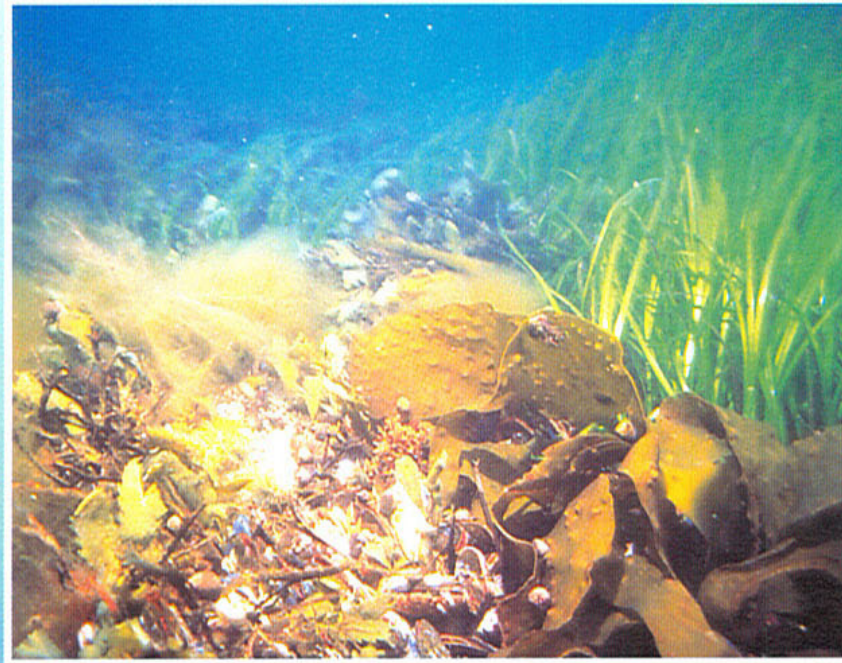


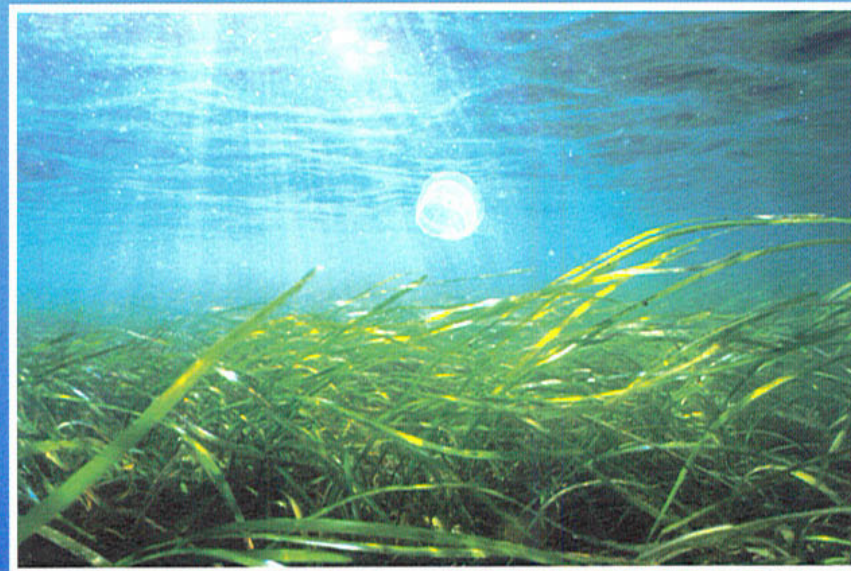
EELGRASS - *Zostera marina*

Although eelgrass grows in the sea, it is not a seaweed, but a group of marine flowering plants. However, it is unlikely that you will ever see the flowers because they are very small and usually hidden at the bottom of the leaves. Eelgrass grows in shallow coastal seas around the world generally in water less than 10m deep. It is usually found on sandy or muddy areas sheltered from strong tides and currents.

Eelgrass is only patchily distributed around the UK. This is partly due to a wasting disease in the 1930s which wiped out populations in many areas. Although eelgrass is nationally scarce, in the right conditions it can form dense beds known as meadows. Other plants that are often found associated with eelgrass meadows include sugar kelp and bootlace weed, together with burrowing animals such as razor shells and heart urchins.



Beds of eelgrass are important for a number of reasons. They provide a wide range of habitats for many other plants and animals, including sheltered nursery areas for some types of fish. The plant roots form a dense network which stabilises the seabed, helping to reduce coastal erosion. In addition, decomposing plants support food chains both inside and outside the beds.



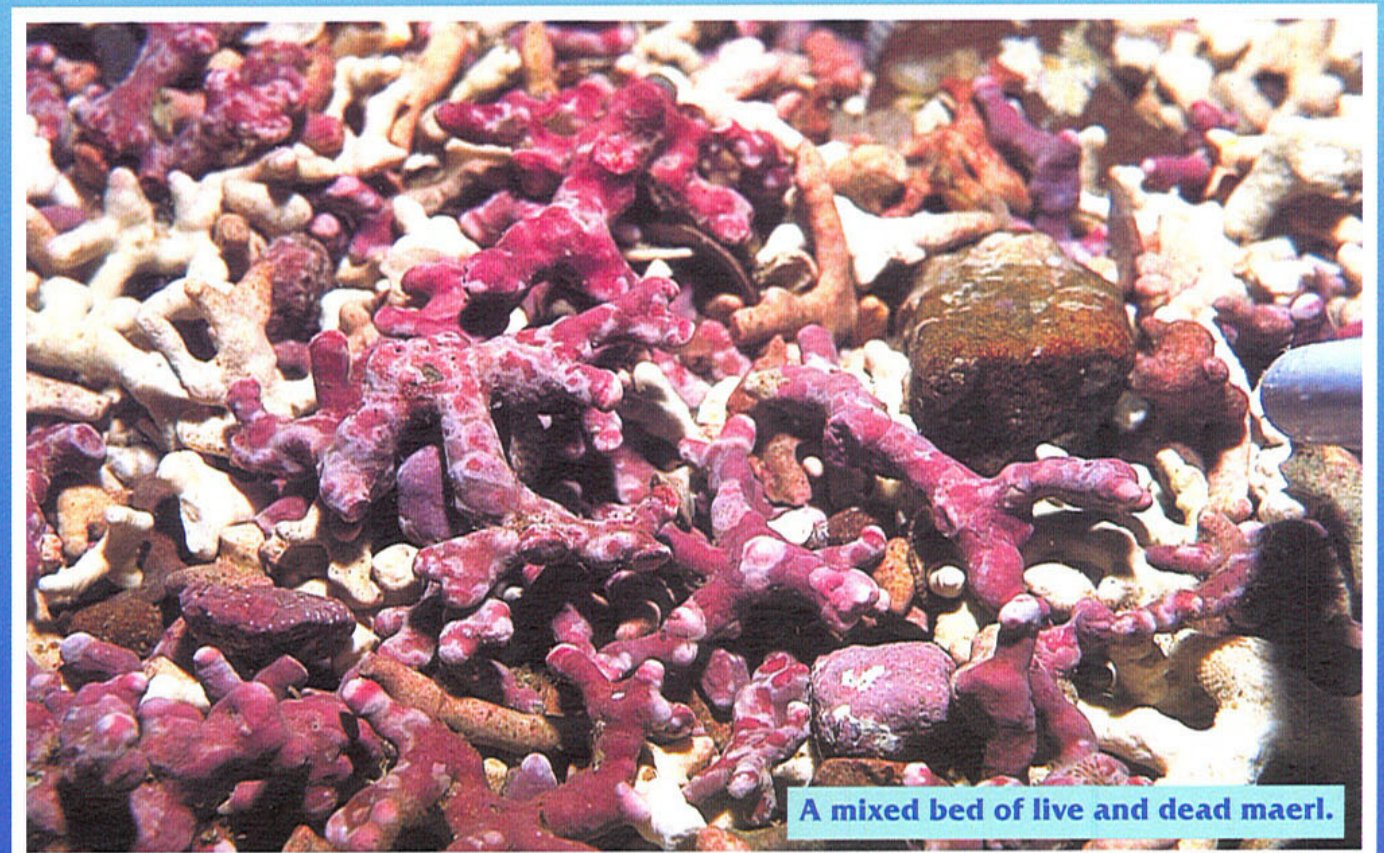
Only one species of eelgrass occurs in Shetland, *Zostera marina*, known locally as 'Marlie'. At present three eelgrass beds are known in Shetland, at South Voe, West Burra, Marlee Loch at the head of Brindister Voe, and in Whiteness Voe.

MAERL

Maerl is the name given to several species of red seaweeds which have hard calcium skeletons. It grows as free living nodules on the seafloor and is one of the slowest growing plants in the North Atlantic, growing only a few millimetres each year. Maerl tends to grow best in tidal flows associated with rapids and in sounds between islands, such as in Bluemull Sound.

Maerl is found from the Mediterranean to Scandinavia, although it is a relatively scarce habitat. It can occur as simply a few scattered nodules, right through to extensive beds. Maerl beds develop very slowly and are usually made up of a mixture of live and dead nodules, although the proportion can vary greatly between areas. Large beds tend to be made up of a bottom layer of dead maerl gravel overlain by a thin layer of live nodules. It is easy to tell the difference between the two: live maerl is pink, but this colour fades gradually when dead.

Both live and dead maerl provide habitats for a wide range of plants and animals, some of which are rare and largely confined to maerl beds. Keep a look out for different species living in and around maerl beds. These may include sugar kelp, an anemone called *Cerianthus lloydii*, common sea urchins, hermit crabs and harbour crabs.



A mixed bed of live and dead maerl.