

# The Helford River conservation

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Beach clean

# The Helford River

The Helford River, often referred to as the Helford estuary, on the east side of the Lizard Peninsula, is one of Cornwall's most beautiful marine inlets and the only one running east-west. It stretches nearly 10km inland with a shoreline of about 47km! Technically described as a 'ria', this ancient river valley was last drowned when sea levels rose some 10,000 years ago after the most recent Ice Age and, with a low freshwater input, is fully marine to the very top of its many steep-sided, muddy creeks.

People have been using the Helford for thousands of years and in recent times this influence has increased with the growth of leisure activities as well as fishing interests. The purpose of the HVMCA is to help protect the valuable resources of the river for the benefit of all who use it and love it, both now and in the future.

## Marine wildlife

Featuring reefs, rocky shores, low cliffs, areas of boulders, cobbles, sand and silt as well as extremely muddy creeks, there is a very wide range of habitats from rock crevices to muddy sediments enabling a wide variety of animal and plant populations to thrive within a relatively sheltered marine environment.

## Seaweeds

Green, brown and red seaweeds (algae) can be seen in abundance, usually inhabiting distinct zones on the shoreline. Those nearer high tide levels are best able to withstand the regular and prolonged exposure that comes with the twice

daily tidal cycle whilst the more delicate algae are either tucked away in damp, shady places or found only towards the low tide boundary.

## Animals on and around the rocks

Limpets, mussels and top shells live alongside abundant barnacles coating the rock surfaces. Other animals such as periwinkles, starfish and sea anemones shelter in pools or damp crevices and under weed beside brightly coloured sponges and encrusting sea squirts. Small shore crabs are widespread and the common hermit crab can be found safe in empty periwinkle shells.

## In the sand and mud

Various bristle worms such as the sandmason can be found in tubes formed from sand grains. The delicate peacock worm fans from tubes of fine mud, whilst others, such as the keel worm, are secure in calcareous tubes on hard surfaces.

## Fish

Shore fish such as the shanny, butterfish and worm pipefish lurk amongst seaweeds in shallow water or pools, whilst grey mullet, cuckoo wrasse, juvenile bass and sand gobies shoal over muddy-sand bottoms or





Conservation cruise

## Community, Commerce and Conservation working together!

The Helford Voluntary Marine Conservation Area is overseen by the Helford Marine Conservation Group within which Advisory and Membership sections work together providing an active network for users whilst highlighting the marine conservation issues by:

- Holding quarterly Advisory section meetings for stakeholders, organisations, managers and conservationists as well as initiating projects
- Encouraging the sensitive and enjoyable use of the river
- Widening public awareness of the special importance of the Helford River
- Organising public talks, walks and other activities
- Promoting the locally produced CD of the Helford River "Secrets of the sea. Exploring Helford's marine life"
- Sending regular newsletters to members

amid eelgrass. The fish population varies with the seasons with flounders making their way up the creeks in winter, whilst bream are found in summer months.

A speciality is Couch's goby that was unknown to science until 1974 when it was first described from shallow water at Helford.

All these animals benefit from the rich waters of the Helford Estuary which carry organic particles

from the land and sea to nourish them and their food chain.

### Eelgrass – a special environment

Eelgrass is the only true, marine flowering-plant in the UK. It has a wheat-like flower-head and grows totally submerged. Many fish, sea anemones,

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### Working river

The sheltered position and abundance of natural resources of the Helford has attracted people for thousands of years. Bronze Age barrows and artefacts give the earliest evidence of activity, followed by numerous Iron Age defended settlements. The river grew in importance as a trade route during the medieval period, with Gweek, Helford and Gillan acting as the main centres. The post-medieval period saw an increase in shipping partly due to the nearby granite quarries of Constantine. Many farms around the estuary developed their own water access through small quays and tracks to exploit sand from the riverbed and to land supplies of limestone. By the 20th century, the main emphasis of the estuary was turning to recreational pursuits and small pleasure craft gradually replaced the large barges. Helford oysters are still cultivated locally and there is a thriving tourist industry alongside the farms with their cattle, daffodil and cauliflower fields.



Warning buoy

For further information about the HVMCA and how you can become involved, look on the Helford Voluntary Marine Conservation Area website [www.helfordmarineconservation.co.uk](http://www.helfordmarineconservation.co.uk)

Fan worms

sea-snails, cuttle fish and fan worms live and breed in the shelter of the sinuous green fronds and we hope to see the delicate sea horse proliferate here one day. The Helford eelgrass beds are very important habitats which is why there are 'no anchor' markers over parts of them near Durgan.

## The Helford Voluntary Marine Conservation Area (HVMCA)

Scientific studies over many years had highlighted the richness of the local marine wildlife. In 1985 when surveys indicated a decline, a wide-ranging group of Helford river users, conservationists

and managers came together to identify and resolve problems.

This resulted in the 1987 designation of the Helford Voluntary Marine Conservation Area targeting the sensitive intertidal area between high and low tides and any influence from the adjacent land and deeper water.

This voluntary approach, which could be formalised quickly, was considered appropriate as it included the local community and the users who were best placed to uphold the new protected status.

Since then surveys of the marine wildlife, human use and extensive public awareness programmes have continued.

More recently, in 2002, the HVMCA became part of an extended protected area with the creation of the Fal-Helford Special Area of marine Conservation (SAC). Around the HVMCA are Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) at Merthen Wood, the Rosemullion Head shore and, more recently, much of the intertidal area within the estuary complex. Most of the inner river is a statutory Bass Nursery Area. Locally the whole Helford River system falls into a Cornwall Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and is identified by the Cornwall Wildlife Trust as a Cornwall Nature Conservation Site within Cornwall Council West 2 District.

## Sponsors

This leaflet has been financed by the National Aquarium Ltd.; 'National Aquarium Limited supports marine conservation and education projects aimed at increasing public awareness of the oceans.'

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