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LARGE, HEALTHY SEAGRASS MEADOWS PLAY VITAL ROLE FOR DUGONG & TURTLE POPULATIONS

Despite seagrasses declining globally from natural and human-induced disturbances, surveys show the largest seagrass meadow in the Torres Strait is still one of the largest and healthiest in the world.

For four years, rangers from the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) Land and Sea Management Unit and James Cook University scientists have conducted monitoring surveys looking at seagrass species composition and biomass in the Torres Strait.

TSRA Chairman, Mr Joseph Elu, said comprehensive assessments of sub tidal seagrass distribution, abundance, and species composition began in the northwestern Torres Strait region in March 2010.

“The Dugong Sanctuary contains the largest recorded single continuous seagrass meadow in Australia, covering an area in excess of 1.3 million hectares,” Mr Elu said.

TropWATER Principal Research Scientist, Dr Michael Rasheed said “The body of surveys show seagrasses in the Dugong Sanctuary are in a healthy and productive state, and the biomass follows a distinct seasonal fluctuation with peaks in late spring/early summer, and reductions in late autumn/winter.”

Mr Elu said the Torres Strait Dugong Sanctuary is likely to play a vital role for local dugong and turtle populations as an important food resource.

“The monitoring program and the baseline surveys from the past four years indicate that seagrass remains in the area throughout the year providing an important and consistent food source for dugong and turtle,” Mr Elu said.

“*Halophila spinulosa* was the dominant seagrass species during all surveys from 2010-2014, which is among those known to be favoured by dugong and turtles and potentially acting as nursery grounds for commercial fisheries species.

“Dugong are listed as vulnerable by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

“Therefore our continued management of seagrass populations must focus on the anthropogenic risks to ensure seagrass resilience remains high so dugong and turtle populations can remain healthy.

“Human-induced impacts include disturbance from coastal development, dredging, trawling, and changes in water quality due to sedimentation, pollution and eutrophication.”

The Dugong Sanctuary seagrass monitoring trips planned for 2014/2015 will ensure TSRA Rangers are fully trained to take over the surveys in the future and is an important science community partnership between JCU and TSRA.

For more information about the Torres Strait Regional Authority visit www.tsra.gov.au

The full report is publicly available on the TSRA website or at:

<https://research.jcu.edu.au/research/tropwater/publications/1421TorresStraitDugongSanctuaryDeeewaterSeagrassMonitoring.pdf>

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