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Bird's-eye view of marine habitats near major Torres Strait shipping channel

The health of sensitive marine habitats near a major Torres Strait shipping channel will be monitored from the air this month.

Island residents who see a helicopter hovering between Zuizin Reef and Kaliko Reef between March 17 and 21 may be interested to know it is part of an aerial survey of coral, algae and mangroves on the eastern side of the Great North East Shipping Channel.

Fisheries Queensland scientists are teaming up with Torres Strait Regional Authority's Land and Sea Management Unit and the Torres Strait Island Regional Council for the helicopter survey.

Torres Strait Regional Authority Chairperson, Toshie Kris, said seagrass research was vital to local turtle and dugong management plans.

"This study will help us monitor the health of our fisheries and provide valuable data which will feed into our turtle and dugong management plans. It's great to see these agencies working together to support a sustainable marine environment for the Torres Strait and I look forward to seeing the results of their work."

Fisheries Queensland biologist Helen Taylor said the survey would target exposed areas at low tide between Zuizin Reef and north to Kaliko Reef.

"The Torres Strait contains some of the most sensitive marine habitats in Australia," Ms Taylor said.

"The seagrasses in this area face many threats, including shipping accidents and oil spills.

"The annual survey provides us with data on the condition of the seagrasses and how well they are faring over time.

"This monitoring will help us understand any changes to seagrass in the area.

"We have seen major declines in seagrass meadows along the east coast of Queensland in the past year because of year extreme weather events.

"But Torres Strait seagrass meadows are thriving. In fact, we have some of the densest, healthiest seagrass meadows throughout Queensland."

Ms Taylor said seagrasses were a vital food source for dugong and turtle as well as providing important nursery grounds for juvenile prawn and fish species which support Torres Strait fisheries.

“The results will give us detailed information on seagrass habitat and health, which will be fed into local dugong and turtle management plans,” she said.

“The data will inform management agencies on the health of seagrasses and will be incorporated into emergency planning and shipping accident oil spill response plans.”

“The annual surveys have helped us to map more than 50,000ha of intertidal seagrasses. Eleven out of a possible 16 Queensland species of seagrass have been identified.”

The research team based at Fisheries Queensland’s Northern Fisheries Centre in Cairns is internationally recognised as the leader in assessment and monitoring of tropical seagrasses.

“Our team has exported its skills and expertise throughout the Pacific and established an international network of seagrass monitoring,” Ms Taylor said.

She said the success of the program was the result of the ongoing partnership between the Queensland Government, local government and the community.

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