

Green as Grass

by Mark Webster

For many photographers the image of a perfect dive site may be clear warm waters and a colourful coral reef teeming with life and I will be the first to admit that sites like these feature high on my preference list. There are, however, a wide range of alternative habitats which offer interesting and unusual subjects for the camera even if conditions are not always easy for photography. Amongst my favourites are sea grass beds (sometimes referred to as turtle grass or eel grass) both in temperate and tropical seas as they are often home to a wide range of macro subjects, juvenile species and every now and then some larger surprise denizens.

Although sea grass is found at numerous locations around the globe, for the purposes of this short account I am going to concentrate on just two locations - one very close to my home in the Atlantic waters of South West England and the other on the southern coast of the Egyptian Red Sea.

UK

The sea grass that we have in the south west of the UK is closely related to the fauna which is common in the Mediterranean. It is sensitive to a narrow temperature range and the grass beds in my area represent perhaps the most northerly examples. The areas where the grass is most healthy are shallow bays and estuaries where sea conditions are a little kinder, but they do often survive some very heavy winter storms. The beds are healthiest in



Juvenile snakelocks anemone on eel grass blades, UK. Nikon D100, LMI Titan, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO200, f16 @ 1/30.

spring and summer but survive year round despite winter water temperatures of 9 or 10° C.

The Helford and the Fal river estuaries are one of the few locations in the UK where sea grass thrives and it provides a rich habitat for all manner of marine life. In fact the Helford estuary



Helford Estuary - Nikon D100, 28-200mm zoom, programme mode.



Dover sole, UK. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 12-24mm zoom, twin Subtronic Mini's, ISO100, f8 @ 1/60.

is classified as a marine conservation area in recognition of this and the fragile nature of the habitat. The visibility in the estuary will vary with the level of rainfall, but on average will vary from 2-3m up to 10m during calm dry periods in the summer. When the waters appear murky it is best to



Spider crabs are well camouflaged amongst the eel grass, UK. Nikon D100, LMI Titan, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO200, f16 @ 1/30.

dive on the flood tide which will push some of the brackish water up river and often produces better visibility under a surface layer of 2-3m. Even at high water the eel grass beds are no more than 50m or so from the shore and begin in depths of only 6m. This is a good place to start your searches as these beds hide a wide variety of species. There are numerous spindly decorator spider crabs which suspend themselves between stalks almost like spiders on a web and the seaweed on the bottom will reveal numerous pipefish, sticklebacks and

in late summer juvenile cuttle fish only 25-30mm long. There are a variety of juvenile fish sheltering in the beds and also reportedly mane sea horses, but these are not commonly seen (certainly not by me despite determined searches!).

There are also well camouflaged hunters within the eel grass preying on the small and juvenile species. Patient observation will reveal scorpion fish resting on the bottom, often almost covered by weed and debris, and the elegant john dory which weaves its way slowly between the vertical



Juvenile cuttle fish are found in the summer months, UK. Nikon D100, LMI Titan, 12-24mm zoom, twin Subtronic Mini's, ISO200, f11 @ 1/30.

stalks. Less mobile residents include several species of nudibranchs and sea hares which are numerous in the early spring. A tell tale sign of both species are the intricate spirals and twirls of their spawn on the base of individual blades of eel grass which will often lead you to the perpetrator.

On the edge of the sea grass beds where the seabed becomes more gravelly and is home to a number of



Topknot flat fish portrait, UK. Nikon D100, LMI Titan, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO200, f16 @ 1/125.

bottom dwellers. The most common are dragonets, topknots, dabs, plaice, sole and if you are lucky the occasional angler fish and thorn-back ray. In the spring and early summer there are also adult cuttle fish which come into the shallow waters to mate and lay their eggs in the sea grass beds.

Red Sea

There is a marked contrast in shoreline scenery between lush greens and rolling hills of the south west UK and the flat arid desert landscape of the southern Egyptian coast. There are now small oasis of green along this coast where tourist developments and hotels have sprung up, but it is very different until you get below the water.

There are several areas of sea grass close to Marsa Alam, but the location that I most often visit is Marsa Abu Dabbab which lies between the port of Marsa Alam to the south and the newly built marina at Port Galeb to the north. Many live aboard boats are now operating out of Port Galeb and this particular bay has become a convenient mooring for the last night of a live aboard schedule, within sight of Elphinstone reef offshore for a morning dive and only a short run back to Port Galeb for the last night. There is also another very good reason for visiting this bay as the sea grass beds attract some large and unusual species which are like a magnet to a photographer.

Some years ago a friend who lives in Hurghada told me a tale of visiting a dugong in a (then) deserted bay just to the north of Marsa Alam and since then I have been trying to find and photograph it for myself. Since then the airport at Marsa Alam has opened and the number of boats and hotels in the surrounding area has increased and with this of course the number of divers as well. During this period I had received plenty of reports from other divers who had seen the dugong even though I had missed it, but determination and luck came together eventually and at last I met my dugong.

Dugongs are the smallest members of the order Sirenia (commonly called sea cows) and



*Dive boats moored at Marsa Abu Dabbab - Nikon D200, 18-200mm zoom, programme mode.
Turtle grass Marsa Abu Dabbab, Red Sea. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 12-24mm zoom, twin Subtronic Mini's, ISO100, f8 @ 1/60.*



are relatively rare world wide. As adults they are rarely more than 3m in length weighing in at up to 400kg and in protected habitats they can apparently live for 50 years or more. They are also listed as an endangered species by the Conservation of International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) amongst others. Their natural predators in the Red



*There are many legends and tales surrounding sea cows and mermaids, most likely as a result of the frustrations and amorous thoughts inevitably suffered by sailors after long voyages in the days of sail.
Red Sea. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 12-24mm zoom, twin Subtronic Mini's, ISO100, f8 @ 1/60.*

Sea are sharks but they are probably at most risk from inshore boating activities and changes to their habitat due to coastal development. The local dive guides believe that there are perhaps four dugongs in the immediate area, but it is only one female that is seen regularly at this location, most often in early morning. Some research indicates that they prefer to feed at night, so this may explain this, however I am sure that the presence of too many divers and snorkellers later in the day is a more likely reason

There are many legends and tales surrounding sea cows and mermaids, most likely as a result of the frustrations and amorous thoughts inevitably suffered by sailors after long voyages in the days of sail. The name dugong appears to have originated from the Malay word duyung which means lady of the sea or mermaid - females are also seen suckling their young at the surface from teats close to their flippers, which is also a source of the mermaid myth. My view is that these poor sailors must have been particularly desperate even though we photographers might find a dugong an extremely attractive subject!

Dugongs are not the only diners on these tracts of sea grass, there are also numerous large green turtles here, complete with attendant remoras, which came as a surprise to me. Although we occasionally come across a friendly or cooperative turtle in the Red Sea I had never come across so many that were so totally oblivious to the attentions of a photographer. These guys just would not be put off their slow munching and would only occasionally deign to look down their noses at you between swallows. Getting too close with the camera just invited a gentle swat with a flipper and when they were ready to head to the surface to breath they would expect you to move and be quick about it!



Dugong heads for the surface for a breath of air, Red Sea. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 12-24mm zoom, twin Subtronic Mini's, ISO100, f8 @ 1/60.

There were also other subjects in the sea grass to distract us from our search - titan trigger fish puffing into the sand for shell fish are common as are brilliant green puffers, box fish, guitar rays (very shy) and one in my group had seen sea horses here. So even though the dugong was not found immediately there was plenty here to make this site well worth diving several times.

Images of the Dugong were the highlight of the dives here, but they are messy eaters on a very soft and silty seabed. Couple this with the attentions of many groups of divers who are not concerned about photography and you have a difficult task ahead of you.

First you should aim to get in the water early - soon after dawn and well before breakfast. The light is low, but you will have a better chance of an encounter with fewer divers around. You then need an element of luck as this is quite a large bay - it is worth watching the surface for 10 minutes before you dive as the dugong will come up for air



Green turtle, Red Sea - these turtles view your intrusion with an expression of total disdain. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 12-24mm zoom, twin Subtronic Mini's, ISO100, f8 @ 1/60.

frequently between the foraging sessions on the seabed. Spotting this shows you where to start the dive.

Once found it is best to try and keep ahead of the dugong's direction of travel - she keeps moving



Dugong feeding as a photographer moves in for a picture, Red Sea. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 12-24mm zoom, twin Subtronic Mini's, ISO100, f8 @ 1/60.

whilst feeding so if you are patient then often the suspended sand will drift behind her giving the opportunity for some clearer shots. If you are with a group of photographers you should all make the effort not to disturb the seabed in front of the subject! Twin strobe flat lighting is perhaps best and maybe angle the strobes slightly away from the subject as you get close to catch the subject with the beam edge and minimise the dreaded backscatter.

I normally visit the Red Sea twice a year with workshop groups and despite my number of visits I am always inspired by the colour and

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variety of subjects and never get bored with the photography there. However, you should never miss the opportunity to explore a different habitat as there are always new subjects, some of them may be spectacular as well. This same advice also applies to temperate waters, so don't forget the sea grass beds in Cornwall if you plan to visit this area as well.

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