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PAVING THE WAY FOR MANAGING RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES IN MPAS

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Studland Bay, Dorset is shallow and sheltered supporting extensive seagrass habitat and popular with recreational boat users. Chain moorings and anchoring have caused fragmentation of the seagrass. Lobbying for the protection of Studland Bay started in 2008 when UK Biodiversity Action Plan included seahorses and their habitat. Finally, the Studland Bay MCZ was declared in 2019 followed by designation of a voluntary no anchor zone (VNAZ) in 2021/22. In 2021 the Seahorse Trust installed ten eco-moorings with screw-in anchors and elastic risers. Subsequently the broad stakeholder Studland Bay Marine Partnership increased this to 87 eco-moorings. Each summer the seagrass density around the original eco-moorings has been monitored by divers, towed seabed-video, side-scan sonar and single beam echo sounder aquatic vegetation height. The results from these have shown no impact and even signs of recovery since there was no longer any need for vessels to anchor around them. In 2024 this monitoring, including drone aerial photography has extended to the whole of the VNAZ. Seahorse Trust monitoring of the two species of seahorse numbers since 2008 initially suggested a decline in numbers but recent results show an encouraging increase. High-resolution camera surveillance of the boat activity through 2024 has shown a high level of eco-mooring usage and decreasing anchoring within the VNAZ, the result of continuous community focussed communication, working and collaboration.