



MARK CARWARDINE WILD THOUGHTS

Simple solutions to conservation problems are as rare as many of the animals they are striving to protect. So why don't we grab the opportunity when there is an easy fix?

Studland Bay, in Dorset, is home to the largest known colony of seahorses in Britain, and it is the most important breeding colony for one species – the endangered spiny seahorse *Hippocampus guttulatus* – in the whole of Europe.

But its future is threatened by mooring chains and anchors from recreational boats, which are destroying the seagrass meadows in which the seahorses live.

The solution is simple: ban anchoring altogether and replace the damaging moorings with eco-friendly ones. In one fell swoop it would allow the seagrass meadows to recover and enable boat owners to continue to use the site.

You'd think that it would be simple, because none of those moorings is licensed. But, unfortunately, that doesn't necessarily make them illegal, because it depends on whether they existed before the relevant legislation, which came into force in 1985.

Thousands of volunteer divers spent years gathering all the data necessary to get Britain's two seahorses protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act. Now it is an offence to damage, disturb or obstruct their home. Yet this is what conservationists believe is happening in Studland Bay: anchors are detaching clumps of seagrass, while mooring chains are scouring parts of the seabed bare, they say.

I recently became a patron of The Seahorse Trust, which is campaigning to protect the seagrass meadows of Studland Bay. With an estimated population of about 40 spiny seahorses, it says that time is running out.

It's time to take decisive action. But the best the powers-that-be can do is to fiddle about with studies, reports and meetings. The Crown Estate (which owns the seabed in Studland Bay) and Natural England are dragging their heels as only powers-that-be know how to do. And if we're not careful, we'll lose our precious seahorses before all those studies, reports and meetings have even been finished.

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, photographer and TV presenter.



Anchors away: save the spiny seahorse of Studland Bay!

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