

## All alone: This used to be Britain's biggest colony of seahorses - but now there is just ONE of the endangered animals 'thanks to destruction by pleasure boats' anchors'

- Studland Bay in Dorset had more than 40 spiny seahorses in a 2008 survey
- But numbers have fallen, and an 80-hour survey this year found none at all
- Campaigners say they know of just one spotted in the bay so far this year
- They say anchors destroy eelgrass which forms the seahorses' habitat
- Boat owners deny claim, saying it is a mystery why animals have declined

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Campaigners say just one seahorse has been spotted this year in what used to be Britain's largest colony after pleasure boats churned up the animals' habitat.

Studland Bay, Dorset, was the only British site where both the spiny and short-snouted species were known to breed in recent years and a survey found more than 40 seahorses in 2008.

But activists say the number has dwindled, and an 80-hour survey lasting several weeks this summer found no seahorses at all.



© Andy Jackson / BNPS



**Alone:** This spiny seahorse was the only one spotted this year in Dorset's Studland Bay, which used to be the largest breeding colony in Britain, according to the Seahorse Trust. It wants more restrictions on boat owners



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**Beauty spot: Studland Bay attracts boat owners throughout the summer - but they deny they are responsible**

The Seahorse Trust, which has long campaigned unsuccessfully for Studland Bay to become a Marine Conservation Zone, has been notified of just one sighting all year.

The lone spiny seahorse was spotted last month off Studland's Middle Beach, near the Trust's study area, by underwater cameraman Andy Jackson in a 20-hour search.

Mr Jackson, who films documentary footage for his firm SubSeaTV, told MailOnline: 'I've wanted to film a seahorse for a number of years and I spent 20 hours of diving time looking for one.'

'I had about an hour following it - it was incredible.'

'They're so camouflaged. This one was coiled up with the texture of its back matching the seaweed behind it.'

The campaigners say eelgrass in the bay's shallow waters, which provides a crucial habitat for the creatures, is being destroyed by the anchors of yachts and pleasure boats.

On one sunny day in July, as many as 350 boats were recorded in the bay - and when the tide goes out, they end up resting on the fragile seaweed.

Mr Jackson admitted that with the seahorses' power of camouflage, there may be more hidden in the bay which have not been spotted.

And boat owners have attacked The Seahorse Trust's claims, insisting they are not responsible and saying the figures are being spun to put unnecessary restrictions on them.

But Mr Jackson insisted: 'Something's definitely changed. There were lots of sightings in 2009 and 2010 and they weren't so hard to find. People could see two or three on one dive.'

'I've seen and filmed the anchor damage myself and seen what it does to the eelgrass.'

'Whether it's a natural cycle and they'll return again, I don't know, but when you see the damage done by anchors it's a no-brainer - that must be stopped.'

'You wouldn't have to get rid of the boats. It's just a case of putting in moorings that don't damage the seabed.'

Five years ago marine experts recorded 40 individual spiny seahorses at Studland and one pair of the short-snouted species.

Since then the Trust says numbers have fallen steadily, with only four spiny seahorses spotted in 2013 and no short-snouted animals.



© Andy Jackson / BNPS

**Underwater cameraman Andy Jackson said: 'I had about an hour following it - it was incredible'**

The male found by Mr Jackson was believed to be a juvenile. Young seahorses are transient, which means the one pictured may not have been resident to Studland Bay.

Conservationists are warning that unless urgent action is taken to protect their habitat, seahorses will be lost forever at Studland.

Dorset-based marine conservationist Steve Trehwella said: 'This summer divers have searched Studland Bay two or three times a day for two or three hours a time.'



**Rare find: The animals are masters of camouflage, and can change colour to match the seaweed around them**

'Both myself and Andy have carried out thorough searches on the site and others have also been looking for these animals and this is still the only one seen in 2014.'

'We need to protect this site before it is too late and we lose them forever.'

Seahorse Trust director Neil Garrick-Maidment added: 'Studland is or was the most important colony for seahorses in the UK and now that colony has all but gone.'

'The whole thing is incredibly saddening. Our warnings about the habitat destruction haven't been heeded by people in authority. I hate to say it but these statistics prove we were right.'

'But I am an optimist and I believe if we can get Marine Conservation Zone status the area might recover and seahorses might start to come back again in numbers.'

Studland Bay has been recommended for Marine Conservation Zone status and the government's Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) is considering the bid.

The move would force boat owners to use environmentally-friendly mooring buoys which ensure they do not have to anchor or lie flat on the sea bed.

Jon Reid, a spokesman for the Boat Owners' Response Group, denied his members were destroying the eelgrass.

'Studland Bay has been used by generations of boat owners, going back the last 70 years and eelgrass has always been there,' he said. 'Why is there suddenly an issue now?'

'There is a huge body of evidence from worldwide research that states that this type of eel grass is very resilient and if damaged it puts on a growth spurt to recover.'

'It is wrong to say that boat owners are causing long term damage to it. There are unusual holes in the eel grass but there are also the same holes in the eel grass outside of the anchoring area so how do you explain that.'

#### CHAMELEON OF THE SEA: FACTS ON THE SPINY SEAHORSE

Spiny seahorses are named after the prickly, fleshy spines which arch down the length of their necks and can change colour to blend in with plants on the sea bed.

Their Latin name *hippocampus histrix*, the animals breed in coastal waters during the summer months and have been sighted off various points on the British coast.

It is the males who become pregnant and give birth, and they have been known to produce broods of more than 500 young.

The animals hunt by waiting in until prey swims close to their snouts, which then suck in a sharp intake of water including the day's meal.

Seahorses pair for life and even after they have mated for the first time, they perform elaborate courting displays lasting up to an hour.

**Sources: BBC Nature / Seahorse Trust**

He added Studland was used more in 2008 than it is now and there could be manifold reasons why the animals' numbers had declined.

A Defra spokesman said: 'We are doing more than ever to protect our marine environment, with 27 MCZs designated last year and a further two more phases of designation expected over the next few years.'

'We already have over 500 Marine Protected Areas in UK waters and just under 25 per cent of English inshore waters are already within MPAs.'

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