

## Seagrass meadows blooming marvellous

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Seagrass meadows in the Cairns Harbour and Trinity Inlet are bouncing back from years of struggle following cyclones Larry and Yasi and other weather events.

Monitoring by JCU researchers has found healthy, lush meadows on the eastern side of the Inlet as well as whole new areas of growth near Ellie Point in the Cairns Harbour.

“These new meadows are very positive. I’ve never seen them here before,” researcher Tonia Sankey said during the flight last Saturday.

Ms Sankey and fellow researcher Dr Alexandra Carter were thrilled at the levels of growth.

“Seeing fresh dugong trails in the seagrass meadows in the Inlet was pretty special,” Ms Sankey said. “Again, we don’t see them very often and this is a great indication that our waterways and ecosystems are healthy.”

The research is carried out by JCU’s TropWATER research centre which investigates seagrass meadows for Ports North across its ports of Cairns, Mourilyan, Karumba and Thursday Island.

This pioneering partnership between JCU and Ports North is one of the first between business and an environment research centre in Queensland and has been ongoing for 22 years said Dr Michael Rasheed, the Principal Research Scientist from JCU who leads the program

It has resulted in comprehensive mapping and assessment of seagrass biomass, species composition, area, condition, and seed bank density.

“This research is vital in understanding critical fish habitats and to ensuring the marine health of ports,” Ports North Chairman Russell Beer said. “We are leading the way with our seagrass monitoring program which has been the basis for research further afield, both nationally and internationally. These latest sightings are very exciting indeed.

“The studies are among a number of environmental management strategies we employ to ensure sustainable growth of our ports in an environmentally sensitive region.”

Seagrasses are breeding grounds and nurseries for important prawns, fish and shellfish populations. Seagrasses filter nutrients and contaminants from the water, stabilise sediments, act as dampeners to wave action and store carbon. They provide food for green sea turtles, nearly 100 fish species, waterfowl and for the marine mammal the dugong.

These latest Cairns results and the full extent of seagrass improvement will be included in a new report to be released in early 2017.



Pictures clockwise from top left: Dr Alexandria Carter; Tonia Sankey; seagrass near Ellie Point sand bars; seagrass meadows on eastern side of Trinity Inlet; new seagrass growth Cairns Harbour near airport mangroves.

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