

# Seagrass Epifauna

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v 0.1.1



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## Introduction

This protocol provides standardized data on seagrass mobile-epifauna including taxonomic composition, diversity, abundance/biomass, and/or secondary production. These variables provide information on the prey resources available to fishes and other consumers that utilize seagrass habitats, as well as the effect seagrass' structure may have on higher trophic levels.

Samples collected in this protocol are post-processed to quantify aboveground seagrass biomass and estimate the biomass/secondary production of mobile epifauna. For post-processing, we recommend using a series of stacked sieves of sequentially smaller mesh sizes to sort animals into size classes (Edgar, G.J. (1990) *Journal of Experimental Marine Biology and Ecology* 137:195-214). The abundance of each species in the size class can be combined with empirical equations relating abundance to biomass and production of different taxonomic groups, providing non-destructive estimates of epifaunal biomass and production.

Additional copies of this protocol, field datasheets, data entry templates, instructional videos, literature, and more can be found on the Seagrass section of the MarineGEO protocol website: <https://marinegeo.github.io/seagrass-habitat>.

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## Measured Parameters

This assay quantifies characteristics of seagrass mobile epifaunal communities, measured as:

- Macrophyte biomass (mg)
- Epifaunal abundance and taxonomic composition (individuals)
- Epifaunal biomass (mg dry or ash-free dry mass)

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## Requirements

Personnel: 2 persons

Time: *Preparation*: 2 persons x 0.5 hours

*Field work*: 2 persons x 0.5 days

*Post processing*: 1 persons x 30 days

*Data processing*: 1 persons x 10 hours

Replication: Six (6) epifaunal samples are taken using mesh bags along three (3) transects (total  $N = 18$ ).

#### Materials Checklist:

##### Field:

- ☐ 18 draw-string mesh bags (500  $\mu$ m mesh size, approximate dimensions: 75 cm x 20 cm, with 20 cm opening)
- ☐ Waterproof paper for internal labels
- ☐ 1 plastic cooler (with ice)

##### Post-processing:

- ☐ 20+ pre-weighed foil tins
- ☐ 500  $\mu$ m mesh sieve
- ☐ Sorting tray
- ☐ 20+ scintillation vials (20-mL) with lids
- ☐ 70% ethanol (0.5-1.0 L)
- ☐ Petri dishes
- ☐ Forceps (fine-tip)
- ☐ Pen/pencil
- ☐ Drying oven
- ☐ *RECOMMENDED* – nested sieve set with sieve sizes: 8.0, 5.6, 4.0, 2.8, 2.0, 1.4, 1.0, 0.71 and 0.5 mm

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## Methods

Fully review this and any additional protocols necessary for the sampling excursion. Address any questions or concerns to [marinegeo@si.edu](mailto:marinegeo@si.edu) before beginning this protocol

#### Preparation:

1. Identify sampling scheme. If following the MarineGEO survey design, review the materials [here](#) (6 replicates x 3 transects = 18 replicates total). Alternately, samples can be taken haphazardly within the bed (if done, record GPS coordinates of each sample)
2. Write 18 internal labels on waterproof paper with the sampling location, transect, and replicate number, and place inside 18 mesh bags (500  $\mu$ m mesh size)
3. Fill a cooler with ice immediately before departing for the field

#### Fieldwork:

1. At each sampling location, identify a vegetated patch at the corresponding point along the transect (if following the MarineGEO survey design) and select the corresponding labeled mesh bag

2. Position the mesh bag over the canopy and gently lower it over the seagrass, being careful to avoid disturbing or dislodging any organisms or macroalgae. It may be necessary to move the bag from side to side to gently guide the seagrass blades through the opening
3. Once the opening of the bag is just above the surface of the sediment, close the bag by pulling the drawstring and either cut or tear the exposed shoots at the sediment surface to release them into the bag
4. Invert the closed bag and bring it up to the surface, flushing the contents fully into the bottom of the bag, then close the drawstring and tie a knot at the top of the bag to prevent the bag from accidentally opening
5. Place the bag with contents on ice in the cooler
6. Repeat steps 2-6 at the next location along the first transect until all 6 replicates are taken
7. Repeat steps 2-7 for the remaining two transects for a total of 18 samples.
8. Transport cooler with samples back to the lab for processing.

#### Post-processing:

Samples are best processed within 24 hours upon returning from the field. Samples can be stored for longer in the freezer but risks damaging the organisms and making them difficult to identify

#### Step 1: Macrophyte dry mass

1. Print lab data sheets
2. Weigh foil tins and record the weight of the tin directly on the foil using a pen. Tins can be either pre-made, or constructed by folding an aluminum foil square over on itself and sealing the sides
3. Open a mesh bag and record the metadata from the internal label on the lab data sheet
4. Gently rinse the contents of the bag into a shallow sorting tray with water
5. Sort all seagrasses and macroalgae by species
6. For each macrophyte species, select a pre-weighed tin and label with the sample metadata (replicate number, date, location) and species name (to lowest taxonomic group). Place the macrophytes into the corresponding tins. For each non-seagrass macrophyte species (e.g., unrooted macroalgae), place entire individuals into labeled tins
  - *Be careful that no animals are transferred with the macrophytes.* This may require picking animals one-by-one out of more complex substrates
7. For each taxon sorted above: record the sample data, species name, and the empty tin weight on the lab data sheet
8. Once no plant or algal material remains in the sorting tray, pass the contents through a 1.0 mm mesh sieve. Gently rinse any loose material through the sieve, and then transfer the remaining contents to an internally and externally labeled 20-mL vial filled with 70% ethanol. Multiple vials may be required for larger samples or organisms. Set the vial aside for epifaunal processing at a later date
9. Repeat for each sample
10. Place tins containing macrophytes into a drying oven. Dry at 60°C to constant weight (usually 1-3 days, depending on the volume of material)

11. Once dried, remove all tins from the oven and weigh to nearest mg. Record this weight (including tin weight) on lab data sheet

### Step 2: Sieve Processing

This step can be done at your leisure as organisms are now preserved in ethanol (Step 1, #8)

*Note:* to prevent overestimating abundances, only count individuals *with heads intact*. “Headless” organisms such as bivalves and tube dwellers should be checked to ensure that they were alive when collected by opening the covering and looking for intact tissue

12. Print lab data sheets

13. Stack the sieves from the smallest mesh size on the bottom to the largest mesh on top (0.5, 0.71, 1.0, 1.4, 2.0, 2.8, 4.0, 5.6, 8.0 mm)

14. Select a 20-mL vial with epifauna (Step 1, #7), open the top, and gently invert it over the top sieve, allowing the contents to pass onto the sieve tower

15. Use a hose or squirt bottle to gently rinse out the vial with tap or distilled water and empty its contents into the sieve tower until the vial is empty

16. Gently rinse the animals through the sieve tower. Take care not to use too much pressure to avoid damage fragile specimens. The goal is for animals to pass through larger sieves until they reach and are retained by the sieve mesh appropriate to their body size

17. Transfer the contents of each sieve into a separate labeled into a 10-cm Petri dish or similar vessel for sorting

18. Identify each taxon in each sieve size class in each sample to species and record the species name on the lab datasheet

If you cannot reliably identify a taxon to species, identify it to the lowest taxonomic group that you feel confident. Then, give it a provisional name (e.g., Nereid polychaete A). Photograph unidentified species and label image file names with the sample information and the provisional species name you assigned on the data sheet. These images can be used to later clarify the species' identity. *Be sure to maintain the naming scheme for all future samples* (especially if samples are processed by different people)

19. Count and record the number of individuals for each species.

20. Return all specimens to the labeled 20-mL vial, fill with 70% ethanol, and seal for long-term storage

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## Data Submission

1. Enter data into provided data entry template
2. Scan the completed lab data sheets and save both paper and electronic versions
3. E-mail data entry file, any photos, and scanned lab data sheets to: [marinegeo-data@si.edu](mailto:marinegeo-data@si.edu)