Seagrasses in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay 2020
Annual long-term monitoring

Smith TM, Reason C, McKenna S
& Rasheed MA

Report No. 21/16

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A Report for Gladstone Ports Corporation

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March 2021

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Information should be cited as:
Smith T.M., Reason C., McKenna S. and Rasheed M.A. 2021. Seagrasses in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay 2020 Annual long-term monitoring. Centre for Tropical Water & Aquatic Ecosystem Research (TropWATER) Publication 21/16, James Cook University, Cairns, 54 pp.

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This publication has been compiled by the Centre for Tropical Water & Aquatic Ecosystem Research (TropWATER), James Cook University.

Acknowledgments:
This project was funded by the Gladstone Ports Corporation Ltd. We wish to thank the many TropWATER staff for their valuable assistance in the field, lab and data processing.

KEY FINDINGS

Seagrass Condition 2020

Good

1. Seagrasses in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay were surveyed from the 25^{th} October – 6^{th} November 2020 as part of a long-term annual monitoring program. This was the first survey since 2008 that only included the fourteen long term monitoring meadows.

2. Overall, seagrass condition was good for the second consecutive year after an extended period of poor or satisfactory seagrass condition prior to 2019.

3. Over half the annual monitoring meadows were in a good to very good condition and a further five in satisfactory condition.

4. Favourable seagrass growing conditions due to a lack of major rainfall events and low river flows over the last three years has led to successive years of good seagrass condition in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay.

5. The large Pelican Banks meadow adjacent to Curtis Island was in poor condition for the sixth consecutive year. Biomass remained low and there was a further decrease in the proportion of the persistent seagrass *Zostera muelleri* in the meadow.

6. Herbivory from turtles and dugong on the Pelican Banks meadow may explain its continued low biomass.

7. Seagrass remained in good condition in 2020 in the presence of a large capital dredging project that removed approximately 800, 000 m^3 of seabed material and 256, 000 m^3 in maintenance dredging.

8. Good seagrass condition in 2020 throughout the region suggests that seagrass is well positioned to be resilient to pressures in 2021 including maintenance dredging and the predicted La Niña climate conditions.

IN BRIEF

Seagrass monitoring in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay commenced in 2002, and has been conducted annually since 2004. Fourteen monitoring meadows are assessed annually and their condition reported based on variations in three key seagrass metrics - biomass, area and species composition. Monitoring meadows represent the range of different seagrass community types in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay. In addition to annual monitoring, periodic reassessment of all seagrass meadows in the entire Port Curtis and Rodds Bay region has been undertaken at various times during the monitoring program history (Figure 1).

Overall seagrass condition in 2020 was good. This is the second consecutive year that seagrass was in good condition following improvements in 2019 when seagrass was in the best condition for a decade. In 2020 half of the 14 individual monitoring meadows rated as being in good or very good condition (Figures 2, 3 and section 3 for more details). There was however a decline from good to satisfactory in 5 meadows largely due to decreases in meadow biomass from 2019. Seagrass in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay was in poor condition from 2010 until 2017 following widespread seagrass losses in 2009-10 resulting from high rainfall and flooding events associated with extended La Niña weather conditions. Seagrass recovery over the last three years is likely related to low rainfall and local river flows leading to favourable growing conditions that have allowed seagrass to expand and maintain good condition.

The seagrass meadow at Pelican Banks is the only area in the Port Curtis and Rodds Bay region that remained in poor overall condition in 2020. This meadow has had large declines in seagrass biomass and loss of the foundation species *Z. muelleri* over the past six years, consistently being in poor or very poor condition. While meadow area remained similar to 2019 and was classed as very good, overall condition remained poor as a result of continued low biomass. Seagrass at Pelican Banks are subject to high levels of herbivory from green turtles and dugongs, with recent studies indicating these animals have a major influence on seagrass condition in the Gladstone region (Scott et al. 2020, 2021a). High herbivory rates may be restricting seagrass recovery at Pelican Banks, altering the seagrass community and preventing improvements in biomass. Given this meadow's importance as a key seagrass resource in Port Curtis, continued recovery remains key to overall marine environmental health in the region.

Seagrass in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay were in good condition in 2020 despite two dredging programs during the year. Changes in the benthic light environment associated with dredge plumes can impact seagrass condition leading to losses in biomass and cover (Chartrand et al 2018). Approximately 800,000 m^3 of seabed material was removed from inner harbour shipping channel as part of capital works and 256,000 m^3 in maintenance dredging in the shipping channel in 2020. These dredging operations had no measured impact on seagrass condition which remained similar within the port and the Rodds Bay reference area. High seagrass biomass and meadow area recorded in 2019 ensured seagrass was resilient to potential low light conditions that can be associated with dredging. Continuing high biomass and meadow area in 2020 will help seagrass meadows in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay remain resilient to natural and anthropogenic stressors in 2021.

Continuing good condition of seagrass in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay over the last three years is in line with trends in other regions where seagrass is monitored as part of the network of seagrass monitoring in Queensland. In ports such as Cairns, and Mackay/Hay Point where local environmental and weather conditions have been favourable and seagrasses have recovered at similar rates to Port Curtis and Rodds Bay. In contrast, localised floods at Townsville and Karumba in 2019 led to seagrass declines. For full details of the Queensland ports seagrass monitoring program see: www.tropwater.com/project/management-of-ports-and-coastal-facilities/

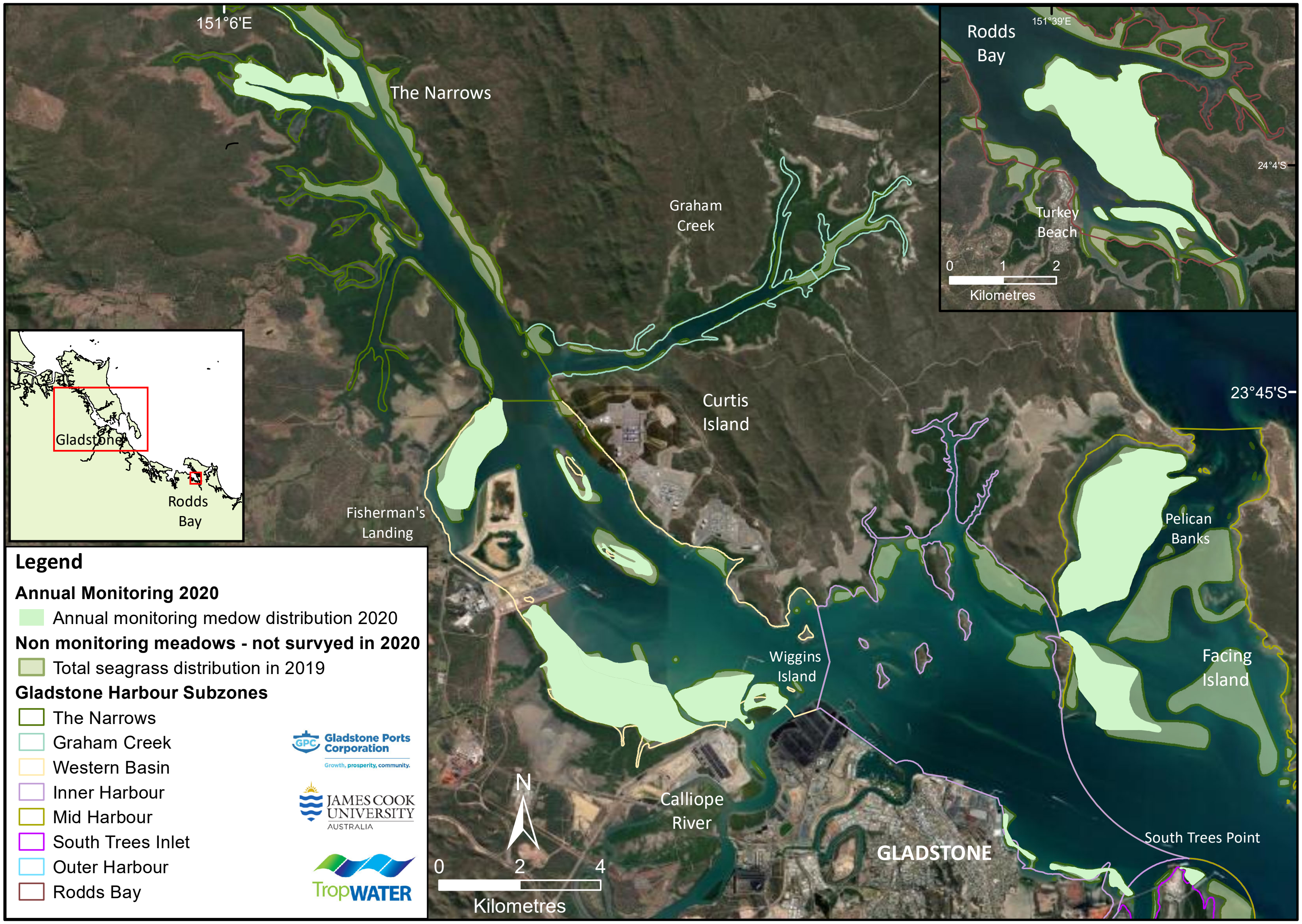

Figure 1. Seagrass distribution of Port Curtis and Rodds Bay monitoring meadows in November 2020.

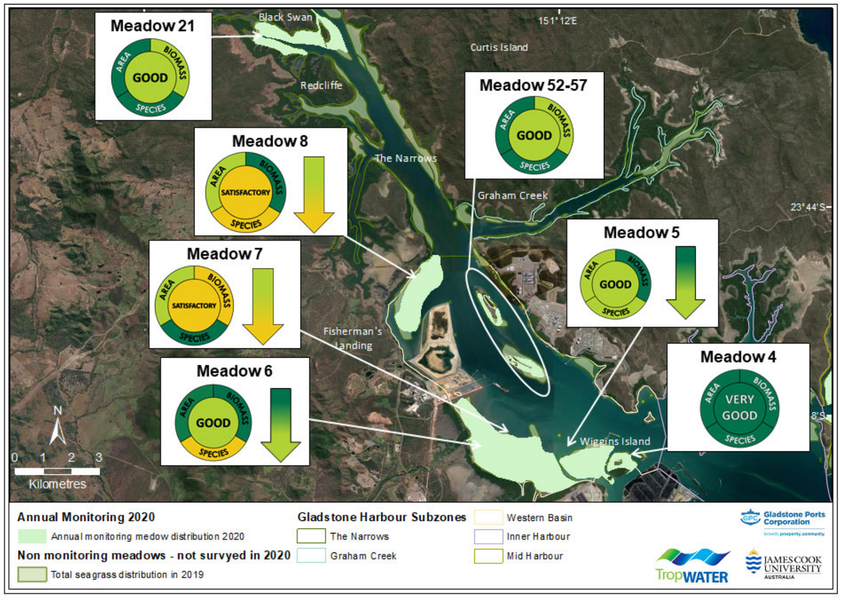

Figure 2. Seagrass distribution and meadow condition in The Narrows and Western Basin Zones (Port Curtis), November 2020. Arrows indicate an overall grade change from 2019.

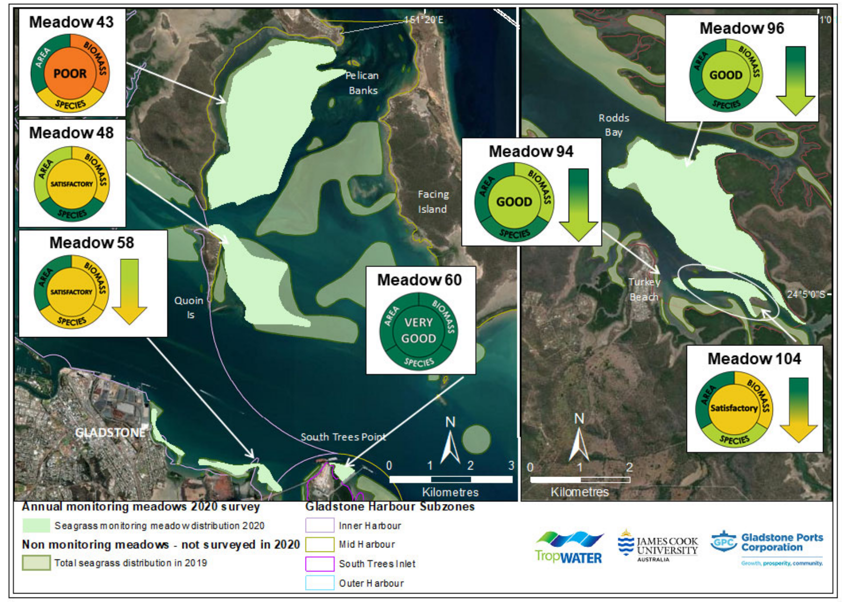

Figure 3. Seagrass distribution and meadow condition in the Inner Harbour, Mid Harbour, and South Trees Inlet Zones (Port Curtis), and Rodds Bay, November 2020. Arrows indicate an overall grade change from 2019.

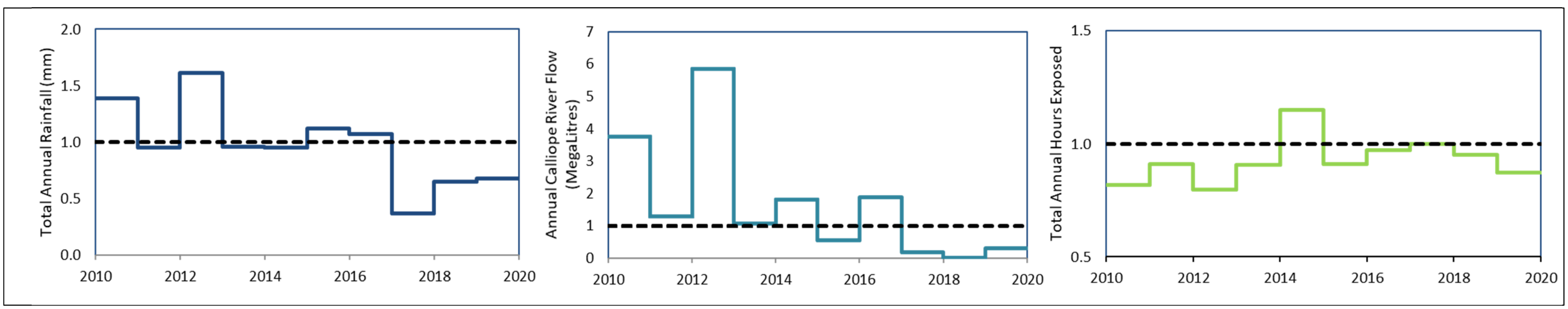

Figure 4. Climate trends in Port Curtis, 2010 to 2020. Change in climate variables as a proportion of the long-term average. See section 3.3 for detailed climate data for the Gladstone region

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

dbMSL	Depth below Mean Sea Level
DFT	Dugong Feeding Trail
DPA	Dugong Protection Area
DW	Dry Weight
GIS	Geographic Information System
GPC	Gladstone Ports Corporation
GPS	Global Positioning System
IDW	Inverse Distance Weighted
JCU	James Cook University
MSQ	Maritime Safety Queensland
PCIMP	Port Curtis Integrated Management Program
R	Reliability estimator of seagrass meadow area
SE	Standard Error
TropWATER	Centre for Tropical Water & Aquatic Ecosystem Research
WBDDP	Western Basin Dredging and Disposal Project

1 INTRODUCTION

Seagrasses provide a range of critically important and economically valuable ecosystem services including coastal protection, support of fisheries production, nutrient cycling, and particle trapping (Costanza et al. 2014; Hemminga and Duarte 2000). Seagrass meadows show measurable responses to changes in water quality, making them ideal indicators to monitor the health of marine environments (Orth et al. 2006; Abal and Dennison 1996; Dennison et al. 1993).

1.1 Queensland ports seagrass monitoring program

A long-term seagrass monitoring and assessment program is established in the majority of Queensland's commercial ports. The program was developed by the Seagrass Ecology Group at James Cook University's (JCU) Centre for Tropical Water and Aquatic Ecosystem Research (TropWATER) in partnership with the various Queensland port authorities. A common method and rationale provides a network of seagrass monitoring locations comparable across the State (Figure 5).

A strategic long-term assessment and monitoring program for seagrass provides port managers and regulators with key information for effective management of seagrass habitat. This information is central to planning and implementing port development and maintenance programs to ensure minimal impact on seagrass.

The program provides an ongoing assessment of many of the most vulnerable seagrass communities in Queensland, and feeds into regional assessments of the status of seagrass. The program provides significant advances in the science and knowledge of tropical seagrass ecology. This includes the development of tools, indicators, and thresholds for the protection and management of seagrass, and an understanding of the reasons for seagrass change.

Figure 5. Location of Queensland ports where seagrass monitoring occurs. Red dots: long-term monitoring; blue dots: baseline mapping only.

For more information on the program and reports from other monitoring locations see www.tropwater.com/project/management-of-ports-and-coastal-facilities/

1.2 Port Curtis and Rodds Bay seagrass monitoring program

Diverse and productive seagrass meadows and benthic macro- and mega-fauna flourish in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay (McKenna et al. 2014; Rasheed et al. 2003; Lee Long et al. 1992). Gladstone Ports Corporation (GPC) first commissioned a baseline survey of seagrass resources in Port Curtis, Rodds Bay, and the adjacent offshore area in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park in 2002 (Rasheed et al. 2003). Over 7000 ha of coastal seagrass was mapped, including an extensive area within the port limits. The majority of Port Curtis and Rodds Bay lies within a Dugong Protection Area (DPA; declared in 1996), an indication of the region's importance as a dugong foraging ground. Port Curtis seagrasses also contribute to the Outstanding Universal Values of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area rated as providing a moderate contribution locally (GPC 2019).

Annual seagrass monitoring commenced in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay in 2004 in response to a whole of port review (SKM 2004) and following recommendations from the Port Curtis Integrated Monitoring Program (PCIMP). Ten meadows representative of the range of seagrass communities within Port Curtis were initially selected for monitoring. These included meadows most likely to be impacted by port activities, intertidal and subtidal meadows, meadows preferred by herbivores such as dugong and turtle, and those likely to support high fisheries productivity. Three monitoring meadows in Rodds Bay were selected as reference sites, i.e. outside port limits, to determine port-related versus regional causes of seagrass change.

The annual monitoring program has been adapted over the years in response to infrastructure developments within the port area including the Western Basin Dredging and Disposal Project (WBDDP). Adaptations and additions included:

1. Survey expansion to include all intertidal and shallow subtidal seagrass in the Port Curtis monitoring area from 2009-2018.
2. Two monitoring meadows (Meadows 21 and 52-57) added to the program in 2009 due to port developments in the Curtis Island area.
3. One meadow (Meadow 9) removed from the monitoring program in 2011 due to the Western Basin reclamation area's expansion at Fisherman's Landing.
4. All seagrass from The Narrows to Rodds Bay periodically remapped, extending into deep water and to offshore Port Curtis limits, in 2002, 2009, 2013, 2014 and 2019 (Smith et al. 2020; Carter et al. 2015a; Bryant et al. 2014c; Thomas et al. 2010).
5. Monitoring of seagrass reproduction and seed banks at Pelican Banks, Rodds Bay and Wiggins Island between 2009 and 2016 (Reason et al 2017).

The current program has been developed to meet GPC's obligations pertaining to the Long Term Maintenance Dredging Management Plan and includes annual mapping and monitoring of 14 coastal seagrass monitoring meadows and five-yearly mapping of all coastal and deep water seagrass in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay. Additional research and monitoring programs have complemented annual monitoring.
These have included:

- Biannual surveys of Port Curtis and Rodds Bay monitoring areas from 2010-2014 (Carter et al. 2015a; Bryant et al. 2014c; Davies et al. 2013; Rasheed et al. 2012; Chartrand et al. 2011; Thomas et al. 2010);
- The establishment of sensitive receptor sites where information on seagrass change was collected monthly to quarterly and linked to water quality monitoring (Bryant et al. 2016; Davies et al. 2015; Bryant et al. 2014a; McCormack et al. 2013);
- Establishment of seagrass light requirements and investigations of sub-lethal indicators of seagrass stress (Schliep et al. 2015; Chartrand et al. 2012; 2016).

Annual monitoring and the additional programs have demonstrated inter- and intra-annual variability in seagrass meadow biomass, area and species composition in the region. Seagrass condition varies according to regional and local climate and weather conditions (Chartrand et al. 2009). Climate induced inter-annual variability is common throughout tropical seagrass meadows of the Indo-Pacific (Agawin et al. 2001). Seagrasses also are highly seasonal. Gladstone seagrass has two broad seasons; the growing season (July – January) when meadows typically increase in biomass and area in response to favourable conditions for growth; and the senescent season (February – June) when meadows typically retract and rely on carbohydrate stores or seeds to persist following wet season conditions such as flooding, poor water quality and light reductions (Chartrand et al. 2016). Annual monitoring is scheduled to coincide with the growing season when seagrass meadows are generally at their peak.

High rainfall, river outflow and tropical cyclones from the 2009/2010 and 2010/2011 La Niña led to significant seagrass losses in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay and more broadly across North East Queensland (Chartrand et al. 2019; McKenna et al. 2015; Rasheed et al. 2014). In extreme cases, such as in Rodds Bay, meadows were temporally lost (Rasheed et al. 2012; Carter et al. 2015a). Recovery has been slow in many regions and many meadows in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay were in poor or very poor condition from 2011-2014 (Chartrand et al. 2019). Favourable climate conditions such as low rainfall and river outflow saw an improvement in meadow condition over the last 3-5 years culminating in most meadows returning to near or above long-term average for condition indicators (Smith et al. 2020). In this report we update seagrass condition for the 14 established monitoring meadows in 2020.

2 METHODS

2.1 Field surveys

Survey and monitoring methods followed the established techniques for TropWATER's Queensland-wide seagrass monitoring programs. Detailed methods used in Gladstone are in previous reports (Rasheed et al. 2005; Rasheed et al. 2003). Seagrass was surveyed 25th October – 16th November 2020 during the peak seagrass growth period. Standardising surveys to every October-December allows for appropriate comparisons of seagrass condition among years. This survey involved mapping and assessing the 14 long-term monitoring meadows within Port Curtis and Rodds Bay.

Intertidal meadows were surveyed at low tide using a helicopter. GPS was used to map the position of meadow boundaries and sites were scattered haphazardly within each meadow. Sites were surveyed as the helicopter hovered within one metre above the substrate (Figure 6a). Shallow subtidal meadows were sampled by boat using camera drops and a Van Veen grab (16.5 cm x 17.5 cm, depth 8 cm, Figure 6b, c). Subtidal sites were positioned at ~50 - 500 m intervals running perpendicular from the shoreline, or where major changes in bottom topography occurred, and extended offshore beyond the edge of each meadow. Haphazard sites also were surveyed within each meadow. The appropriate number of sites required to detect seagrass change for each monitoring meadow was informed by power analysis (Rasheed et al. 2003). Where underwater visibility was poor additional sites using the van Veen grab were used to assist in determining the presence of seagrass for mapping meadow boundaries. The details recorded at each site are listed in Section 2.3.

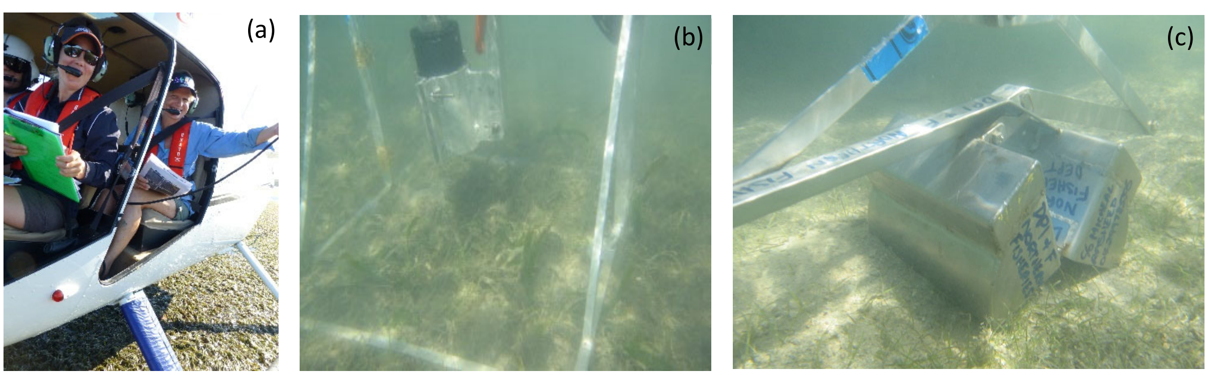


Figure 6. Seagrass monitoring methods in 2020. (a) helicopter survey of intertidal seagrass, (b, c) boat-based camera drops and van Veen grab for subtidal seagrass.

2.2 Seagrass biomass

Seagrass above-ground biomass was determined using a "visual estimates of biomass" technique (Mellors 1991; Kirkman 1978). At each coastal site a 0.25 m^2 quadrat was placed haphazardly three times. An observer assigned a biomass rank to each quadrat while referencing a series of quadrat photographs of similar seagrass habitats where the above-ground biomass had previously been measured. Two separate ranges were used - low biomass and high biomass. The percentage contribution of each species to each quadrat's biomass also was recorded.

At the survey's completion, the observer ranked a series of calibration quadrat photographs representative of the range of seagrass biomass and species composition observed during the survey. These calibration quadrats had previously been harvested and the above-ground biomass weighed in the laboratory. A separate regression of ranks and biomass from the calibration quadrats was generated for each observer and applied to the biomass ranks recorded in the field. Field biomass ranks were converted into above-ground biomass estimates in grams dry weight per square metre (g DW m^{-2}) for each of the replicate quadrats at a site. Site biomass, and the biomass of each species, is the mean of the replicates.

2.3 Geographic Information System

All survey data were entered into a Geographic Information System (GIS) using ArcGIS 10.8®. Three GIS layers were created to describe seagrass in the survey area: a site layer, biomass interpolation layer and meadow layer.

2.3.1 Site layer

The site (point) layer contains data collected at each site, including:

- Site number
- Temporal details – Survey date and time.
- Spatial details – Latitude, longitude, depth below mean sea level (metres) for subtidal sites.
- Habitat information – Sediment type; seagrass information including presence/absence, above-ground biomass (total and for each species) and biomass standard error (SE); site benthic cover (percent cover of algae, seagrass, benthic macro-invertebrates, open substrate); dugong feeding trail presence/absence.
- Sampling method and any relevant comments.

2.3.2 Interpolation layer

The interpolation (raster) layer describes spatial variation in seagrass biomass across each meadow and was created using an inverse distance weighted (IDW) interpolation of seagrass site data within each meadow.

2.3.3 Meadow layer

The meadow (polygon) layer provides summary information for all sites within each meadow, including:

- Meadow ID number – A unique number assigned to each meadow to allow comparisons among surveys.
- Temporal details – Survey date.
- Habitat information – Mean meadow biomass ± (SE), meadow area (hectares) ± reliability estimate (R) (Table 1), number of sites within the meadow, seagrass species present, meadow density and community type (Tables 2, 3), meadow landscape category (Figure 7).
- Sampling method and any relevant comments.

Meadow boundaries were constructed using GPS marked meadow boundaries where possible, seagrass presence/absence site data, field notes, colour satellite imagery of the survey region (Source: ESRI), and aerial photographs taken during helicopter surveys. Meadow area was determined using the calculate geometry function in ArcGIS® 10.8. Meadows were assigned a mapping precision estimate (in metres) based on mapping methods used for that meadow (Table 1). Mapping precision ranged from ≤5 m for intertidal seagrass meadows with boundaries mapped by helicopter to ±50 m for subtidal meadows with boundaries mapped by distance between sites with and without seagrass. The mapping precision estimate was used to calculate a buffer around each meadow representing error; the area of this buffer is expressed as a meadow reliability estimate (R) in hectares.

Meadows were described using a standard nomenclature system developed for Queensland's seagrass meadows. Seagrass community type was determined using the dominant and other species' percent contribution to mean meadow biomass (for all sites within a meadow) (Table 2). Community density was based on mean biomass of the dominant species within the meadow (Table 3).

Table 1. Methods used to determine mapping precision estimates for each seagrass meadow.

Mapping precision	Mapping method
<5 m	Meadow boundaries mapped by GPS from helicopter, Intertidal meadows completely exposed or visible at low tide, Relatively high density of mapping and survey sites, Recent aerial photography aided in mapping.
10-20 m	Meadow boundaries determined from helicopter and boat surveys, Intertidal boundaries interpreted from helicopter mapping and survey sites, Recent aerial photography aided in mapping, Subtidal boundaries interpreted from survey sites, Moderately high density of mapping and survey sites.
20-50 m	Meadow boundaries determined from helicopter and boat surveys, Intertidal boundaries interpreted from helicopter mapping and survey sites, Subtidal boundaries interpreted from boat survey sites, Lower density of survey sites for some sections of boundary.
50–200 m	Meadow boundaries determined from boat surveys, Subtidal meadows interpreted from survey sites, Lower density of survey sites for meadow boundary.

Table 2. Nomenclature for seagrass community types in Gladstone.

Community type	Species composition
Species A	Species A is >90-100% of composition
Species A with Species B (2 species present) Species A with mixed species (>2 species)	Species A is >60-90% of composition
Species A/Species B	Species A is 40-60% of composition

Table 3. Seagrass meadow density categories based on mean above-ground biomass ranges for the dominant species.

Density	Mean above-ground biomass (g DW m^{-2})				
	Halodule uninervis (thin)	*Halophila ovalis; Halophila decipiens*	*Halodule uninervis* (wide)	*Halophila spinulosa*	*Zostera muelleri*
Light	<1	<1	<5	<15	<20
Moderate	1-4	1-5	5-25	15-35	20–60
Dense	>4	>5	>25	>35	>60

Isolated seagrass patches
The majority of area within the meadow consists of unvegetated sediment interspersed with isolated patches of seagrass.

Aggregated seagrass patches
The meadow consists of numerous seagrass patches but still features substantial gaps of unvegetated sediment within the boundary.

Continuous seagrass cover
The majority of meadow area consists of continuous seagrass cover with a few gaps of unvegetated sediment.

Figure 7. Seagrass meadow landscape categories: (a) Isolated seagrass patches, (b) aggregated seagrass patches, (c) continuous seagrass cover.

2.4 Environmental data

Environmental data were collated for the 12 months preceding each survey. Tidal data was provided by Maritime Safety Queensland (© The State of Queensland (Department of Transport and Main Roads) 2019/20, Tidal Data) for Gladstone at Auckland Point (MSQ station #052027A; www.msq.qld.gov.au). Total daily rainfall (mm) was obtained for the nearest weather station from the Australian Bureau of Meteorology (Gladstone Radar station #039123; http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/data/). Calliope River water flow data (total monthly megalitres) was obtained from the Department of Regional Development, Manufacturing and Water (station #132001A; https://water-monitoring.information.qld.gov.au/).

2.5 Seagrass condition index

A condition index was developed for seagrass monitoring meadows based on changes in mean above-ground biomass, total meadow area and species composition relative to a 10 year baseline. Seagrass condition for each indicator in each meadow was scored from 0 to 1 and assigned one of five grades: A (very good), B (good), C (satisfactory), D (poor) and E (very poor). Overall meadow condition is the lowest indicator score where this is biomass or area. Where species composition is the lowest score, it contributes 50% of the overall meadow score, and the next lowest indicator (area or biomass) contributes the remaining 50%. The flow chart in Figure 8 summarises the methods used to calculate seagrass condition. See Appendix 1 and 2 for full details of score calculation.

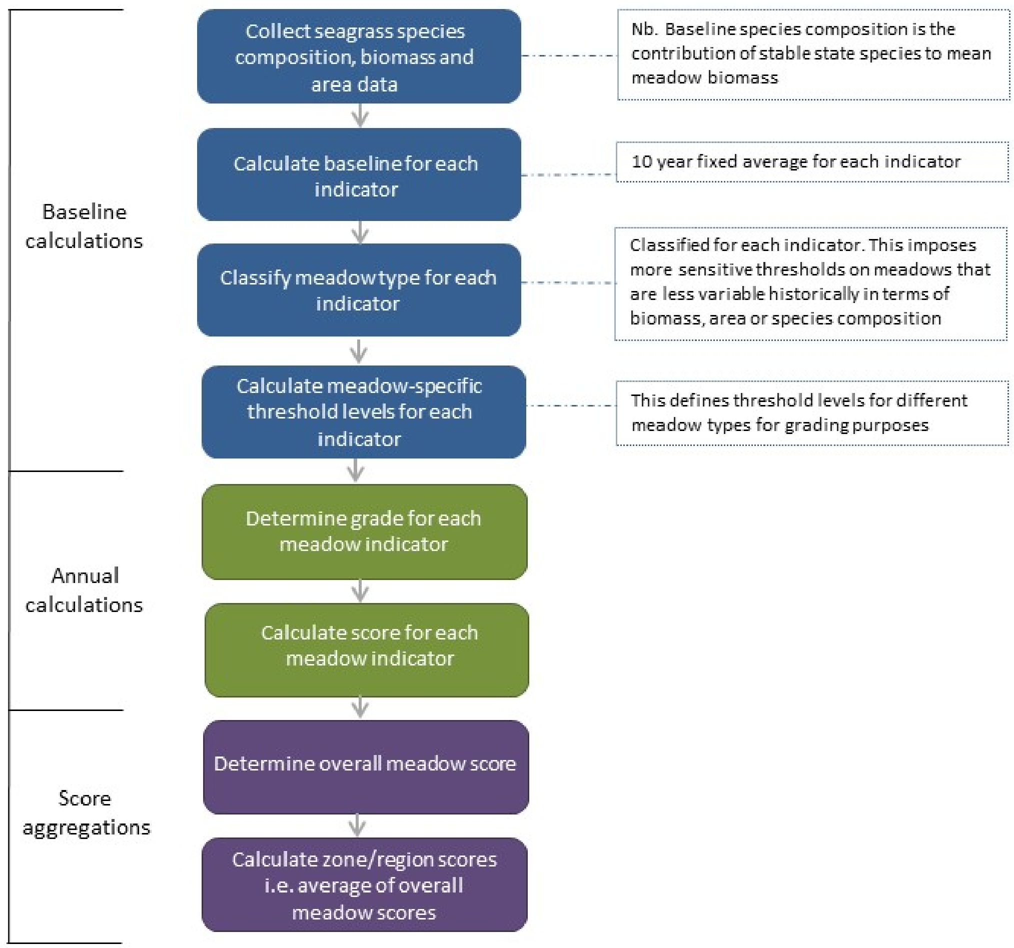


Figure 8. Flow chart used to determine monitoring meadow condition.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Seagrass presence and species in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay

A total of 868 coastal sites were assessed across the 14 seagrass monitoring meadows in 2020 (Figure 9). Five seagrass species from three families were observed during the survey (Figure 10). Total seagrass area was 2,569 ± 95 ha across the 14 monitoring meadows in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay. In the Western Basin, seagrass covered 981 ± 49 ha and in Rodds Bay covered 433 ± 18 ha. Dugong feeding trails were observed at meadows in the Western Basin and Mid Harbour zones.

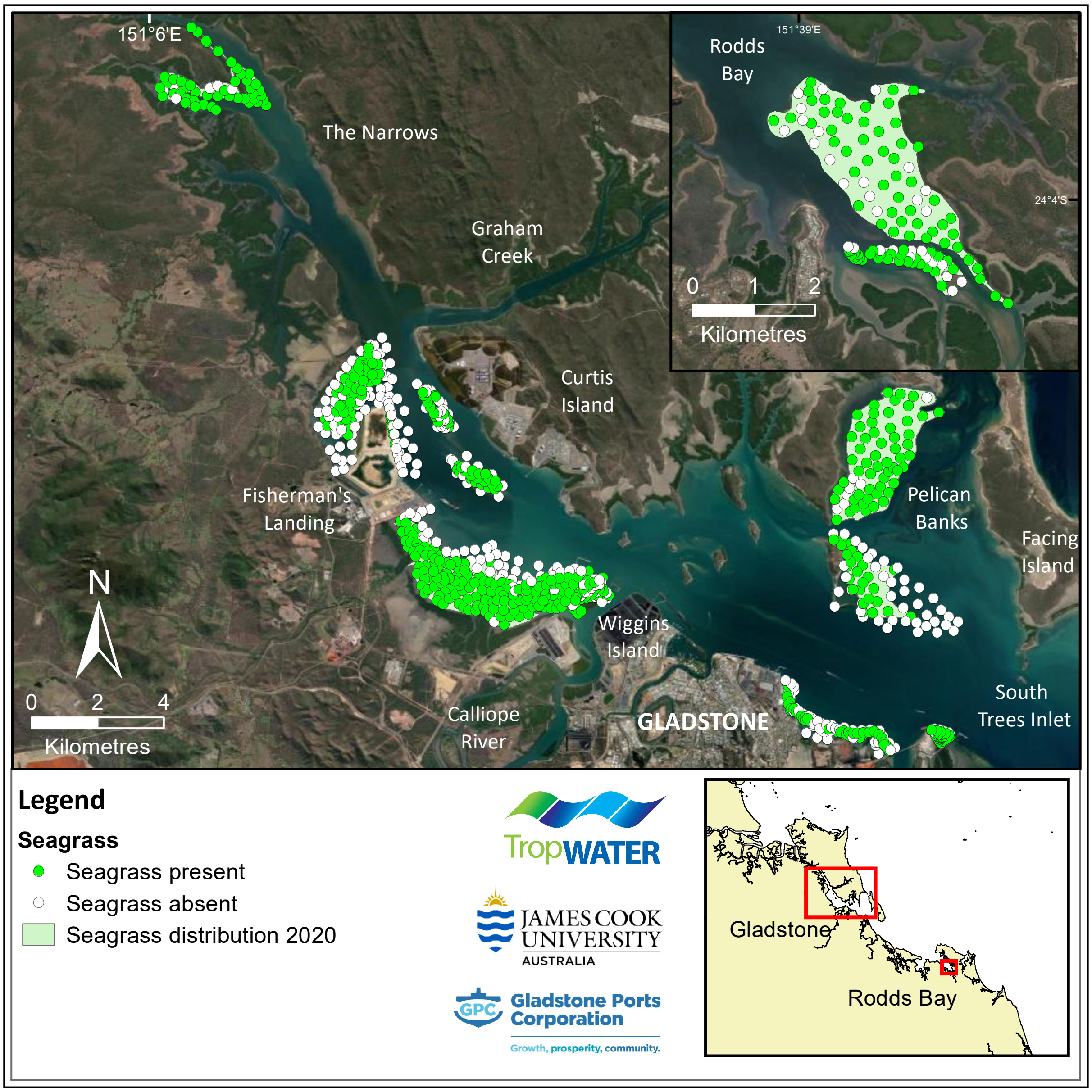


Figure 9. Seagrass presence/absence at seagrass assessment sites within Port Curtis and Rodds Bay in 2020.

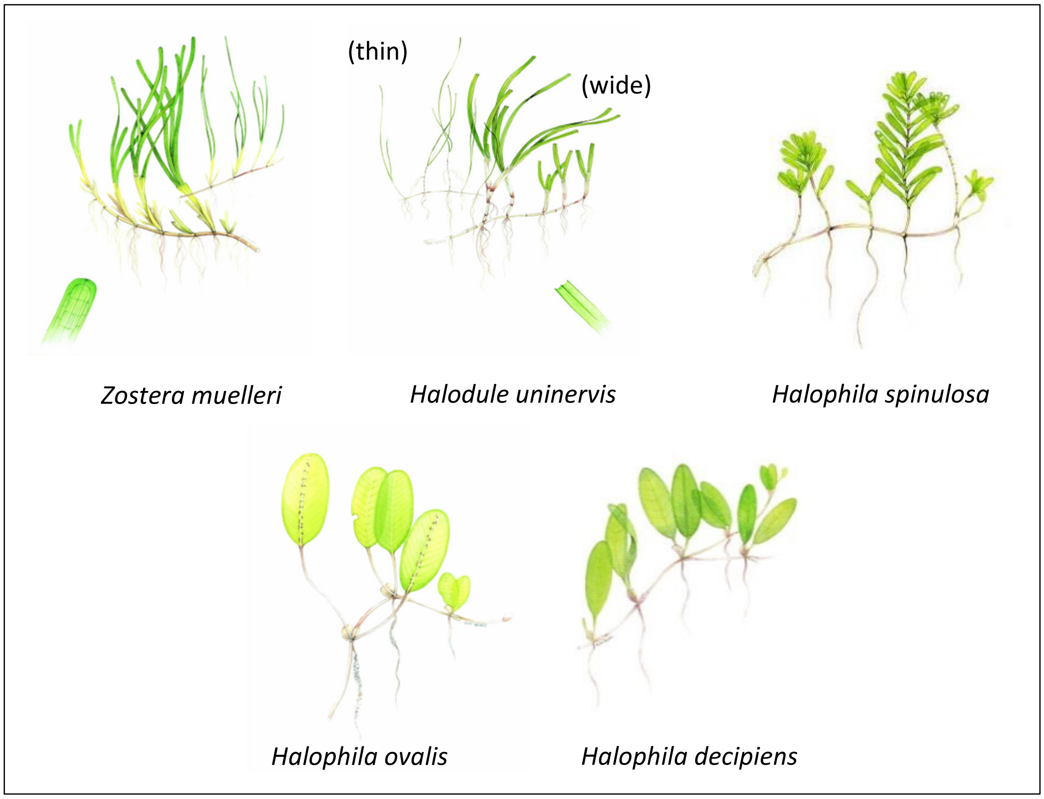


Figure 10. Seagrass species present in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay, 2020.

3.2 Seagrass condition in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay

The overall condition for Port Curtis and Rodds Bay seagrass in 2020 was good for the second consecutive year (Table 4). Individual monitoring meadow condition was predominantly in good or very good condition. For some meadows there was a decline in meadow biomass that resulted in the condition of five meadows moving from good/very good to satisfactory. Meadow biomass at Pelican Banks remained in poor condition for the sixth consecutive year.

Port Curtis and Rodds Bay has been partitioned into zones (see Figure 1) for the purposes of assessing water quality and for developing a regional report card (GHHP, 2021). We present the results for the 2020 seagrass monitoring for monitoring meadows in each of the zones.

Table 4. Grades and scores for seagrass indicators (biomass, area and species composition) for Port Curtis and Rodds Bay seagrass monitoring meadows, 2020. (dark green) = very good condition, (light green) = good condition, (yellow) = satisfactory condition, (orange) = poor condition.

Monitoring meadow	Biomass score	Area score	Species composition score	Overall meadow score
4	1.00	0.97	0.91	0.91
5	0.86	0.82	0.82	0.82
6	0.88	0.94	0.62	0.75
7	0.63	0.74	1.00	0.63
8	0.86	0.69	0.57	0.63
21	0.84	0.99	0.93	0.84
43	0.33	0.87	0.50	0.33
48	0.64	0.72	0.97	0.64
52-57*	0.71	0.95	1.00	0.71
58	0.59	0.91	0.60	0.59
60	0.97	1.00	1.00	0.97
94	0.84	0.87	0.99	0.84
96	0.75	1.00	0.97	0.75
104	0.51	0.86	0.83	0.51
Overall score for Gladstone seagrass monitoring meadows				**0.71**

*Meadow 52-57 consists of several small meadows surrounding the Passage Islands that are grouped for reporting purposes (Figure 1).

3.2.1 The Narrows long-term monitoring meadows

The sole long-term monitoring meadow in The Narrows at Black Swan Island was in good condition (Meadow 21; Figure 11 & 12). Mean biomass was 6.92 ± 1.63 g DW m^{-2} in 2020, the highest meadow biomass since 2010. Meadow area has been in very good condition for the last three years and was 203.71 ha in 2020, the highest since commencement of monitoring. Species composition remained in very good condition in 2020 and dominated by *Z. muelleri* (Figure 12; Appendix 4).

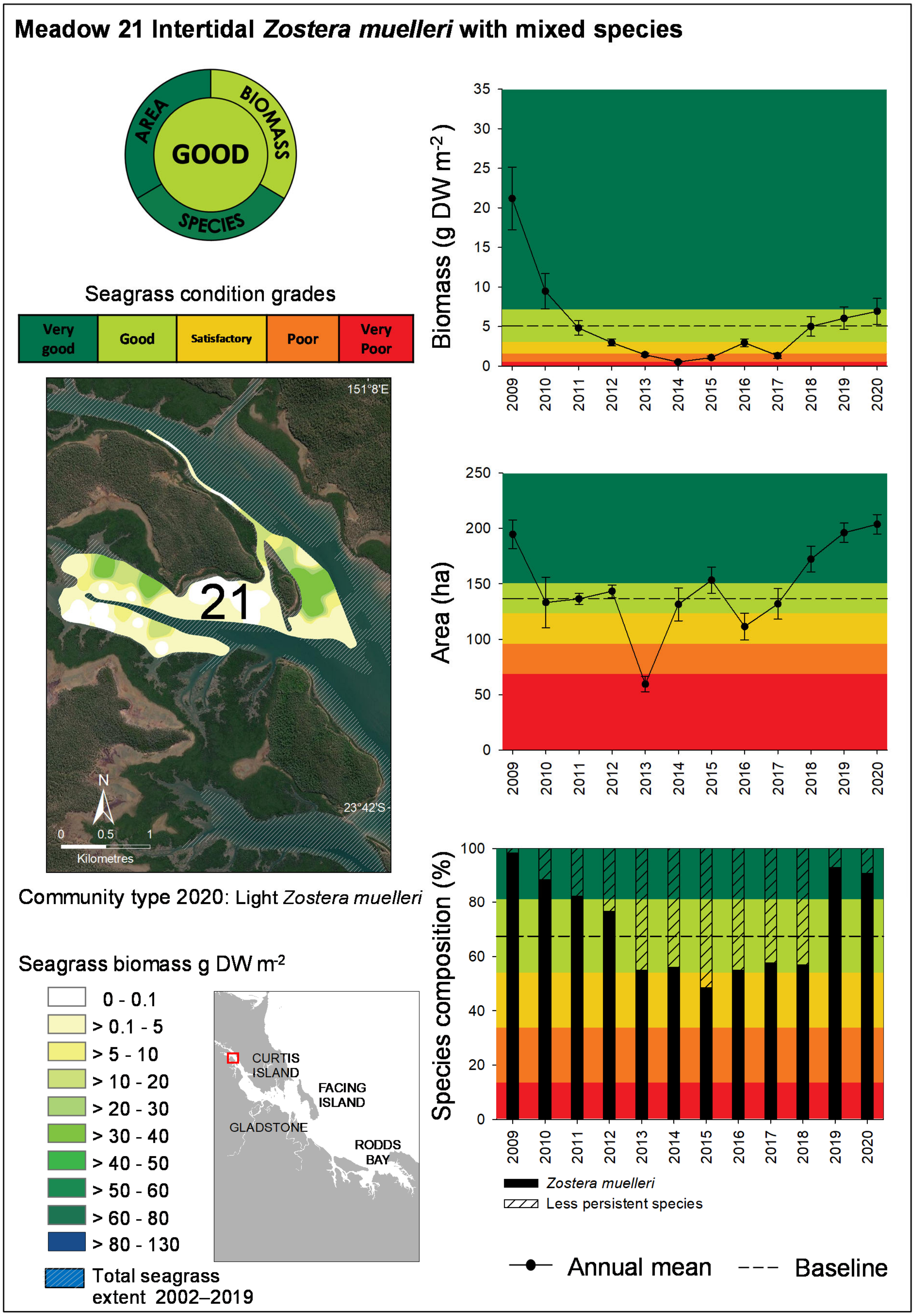


Figure 11. Changes in meadow area, biomass and species composition for at Meadow 21, Black Swan (The Narrows Zone), 2002–2020 (biomass error bars = SE; area error bars = "R" reliability estimate).

3.2.2 Western Basin long-term monitoring meadows

There are six long-term monitoring meadows in the Western Basin Zone; five intertidal seagrass meadows and one subtidal meadow (Figures 1-3). All seagrass meadows in this zone were in satisfactory or better condition in 2020.

Meadow 4:

Meadow 4 at Wiggins Island was in very good condition for the second consecutive year (Figure 12). Meadow area increased for the seventh consecutive year to 41.48 ± 1.99 ha, the largest footprint since monitoring began in 2002. Although biomass decreased between 2019 and 2020, meadow biomass has been in very good condition since 2016. The proportion of persistent *Z. muelleri* has been above the long-term average and in very good condition for two consecutive years now (Figure 12; Appendix 3).

Meadow 5:

The intertidal *Z. muelleri* meadow west of Wiggins Island was in good condition in 2020 (Figure 13). All three seagrass metrics were lower in 2020 compared to 2019 but remained in good or very good condition (Figure 13). The proportion of persistent *Z. muelleri* in the meadow has now been greater than less persistent species (i.e. *H. ovalis*) for two consecutive years, restoring the meadow to its' historical baseline seagrass community type (Figure 13; Appendix 4).

Meadow 6:

Meadow 6 at South Fisherman's Landing is the largest meadow in the Western Basin covering 254.58 ± 6.06 ha. Overall meadow condition was good with biomass and area recording very good scores. There was however a decrease in the proportion of persistent *Z. muelleri* causing the species composition to return to a satisfactory score after being in good condition in 2019 (Figure 14; Appendix 4). Biomass and area have been in good or very good condition for the past three years.

Meadow 7:

Meadow 7, the only subtidal monitoring meadow in the Western Basin was in satisfactory condition in 2020 (Figure 15). This is the second consecutive year of declining seagrass condition since the meadow was in very good condition in 2018. This meadow has been highly variable in both biomass and area over the years, a typical trend of subtidal *Halophila* meadows. Seagrass area and species composition were similar to 2019, at or above baseline levels but biomass declined to 0.78 ± 0.28 g DW m^{-2} the lowest in the last three years (Figure 15; Appendix 3 & 4).

Meadow 8:

The intertidal meadow 8 at North Fisherman's Landing was in satisfactory condition in 2020. Biomass was in very good condition (1.77 ± 0.32 g DW m^{-2}) and meadow area in good condition (203.01 ± 3.45 ha) (Figure 16). Species composition was similar to 2019; *Z. muelleri* comprised 43% of seagrass biomass, lower than the baseline of 67% but greater than the period between 2012-2018 (impact then recovery from 2010-12 La Nina event) when *Z. muelleri* did not get above 25% seagrass composition.

Meadows 52-57:

The Passage Island meadows; meadows 52-57, are a group of predominantly intertidal meadows surrounding the Passage Islands. In 2020 overall meadow condition was good, unchanged from 2019 (Figure 17). Biomass was 0.93 ± 0.14 g DW m^{-2} and area 62.26 ± 5.00 ha both lower than in 2019 but still in good and very good condition respectively. Meadow area saw a large peak to 110 ha in 2019 but decreased back to 2018 levels in 2020. For the sixth consecutive year, the meadow was consisted entirely of *H. ovalis* or more persistent species (*Z. muelleri*).

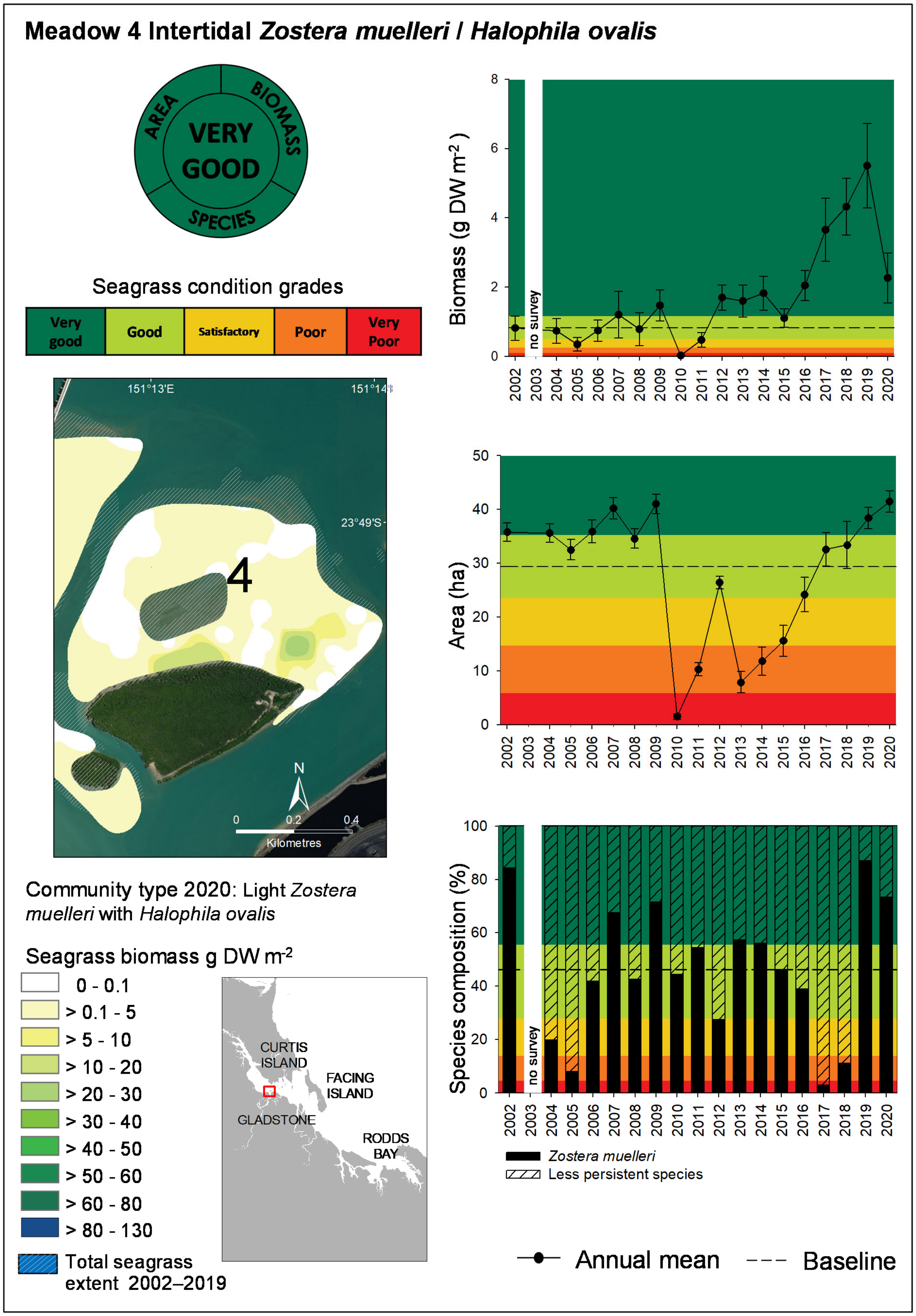


Figure 12. Changes in meadow area, biomass and species composition for Meadow 4, Wiggins Island (Western Basin Zone), 2002–2020 (biomass error bars = SE; area error bars = "R" reliability estimate).

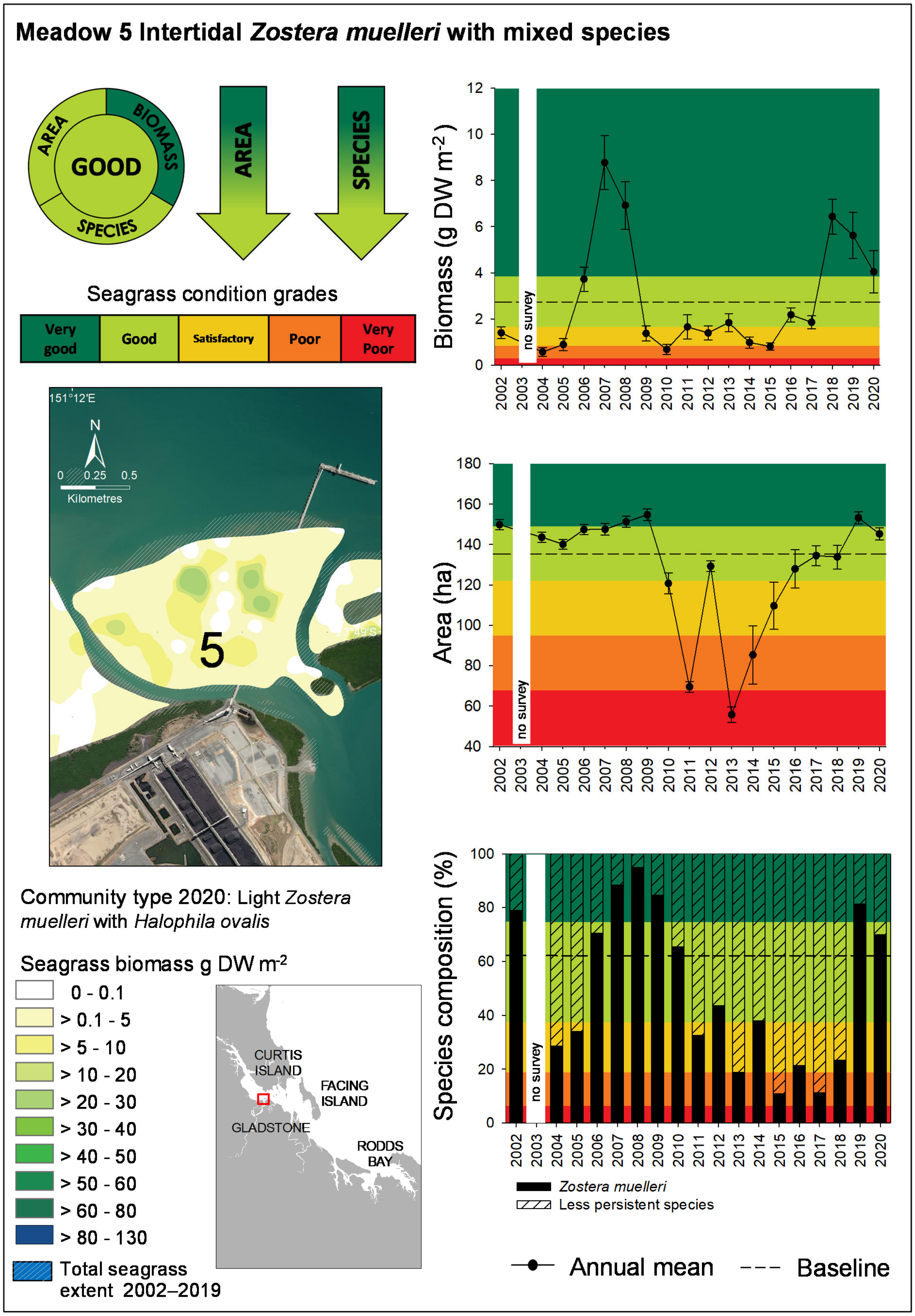


Figure 13. Changes in meadow area, biomass and species composition for Meadow 5, Wiggins Island (Western Basin Zone), 2002–2020 (biomass error bars = SE; area error bars = "R" reliability estimate).

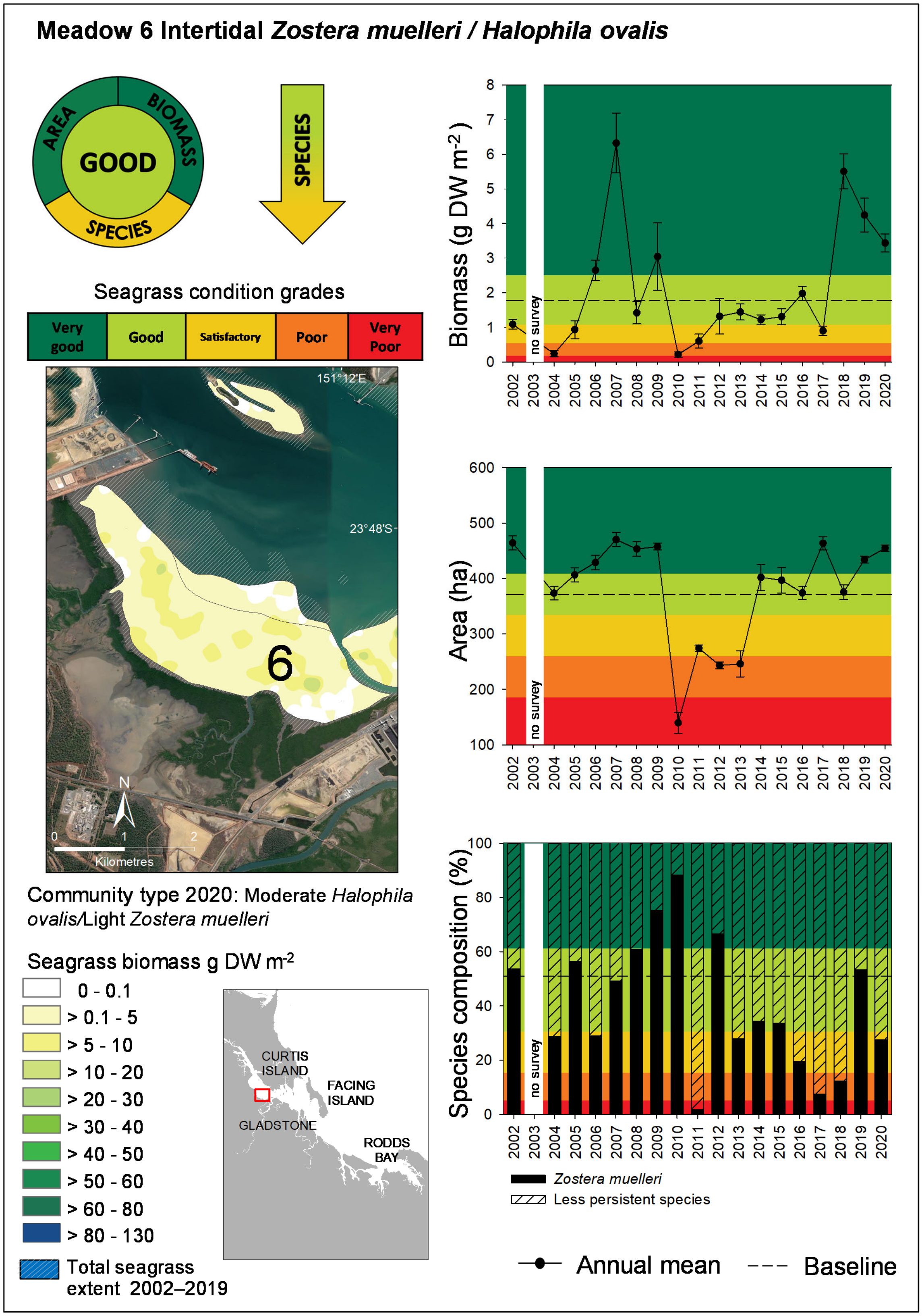


Figure 14. Changes in meadow area, biomass and species composition for Meadow 6, South Fisherman's Landing (Western Basin Zone), 2002–2020 (biomass error bars = SE; area error bars = "R" reliability estimate).

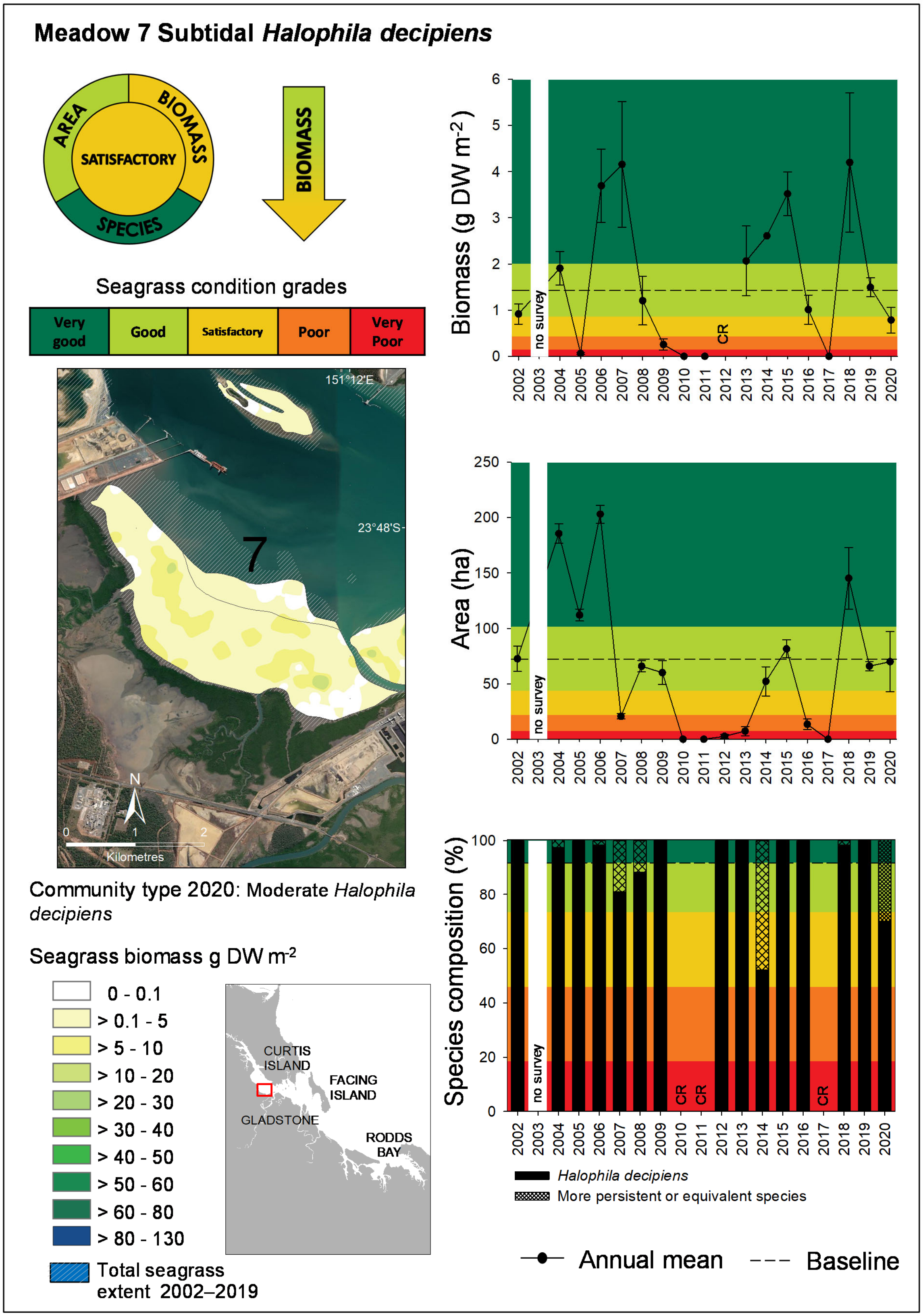


Figure 15. Changes in meadow area, biomass and species composition for Meadow 7, South Fisherman's Landing (Western Basin Zone), 2002–2020 (biomass error bars = SE; area error bars = "R" reliability estimate).

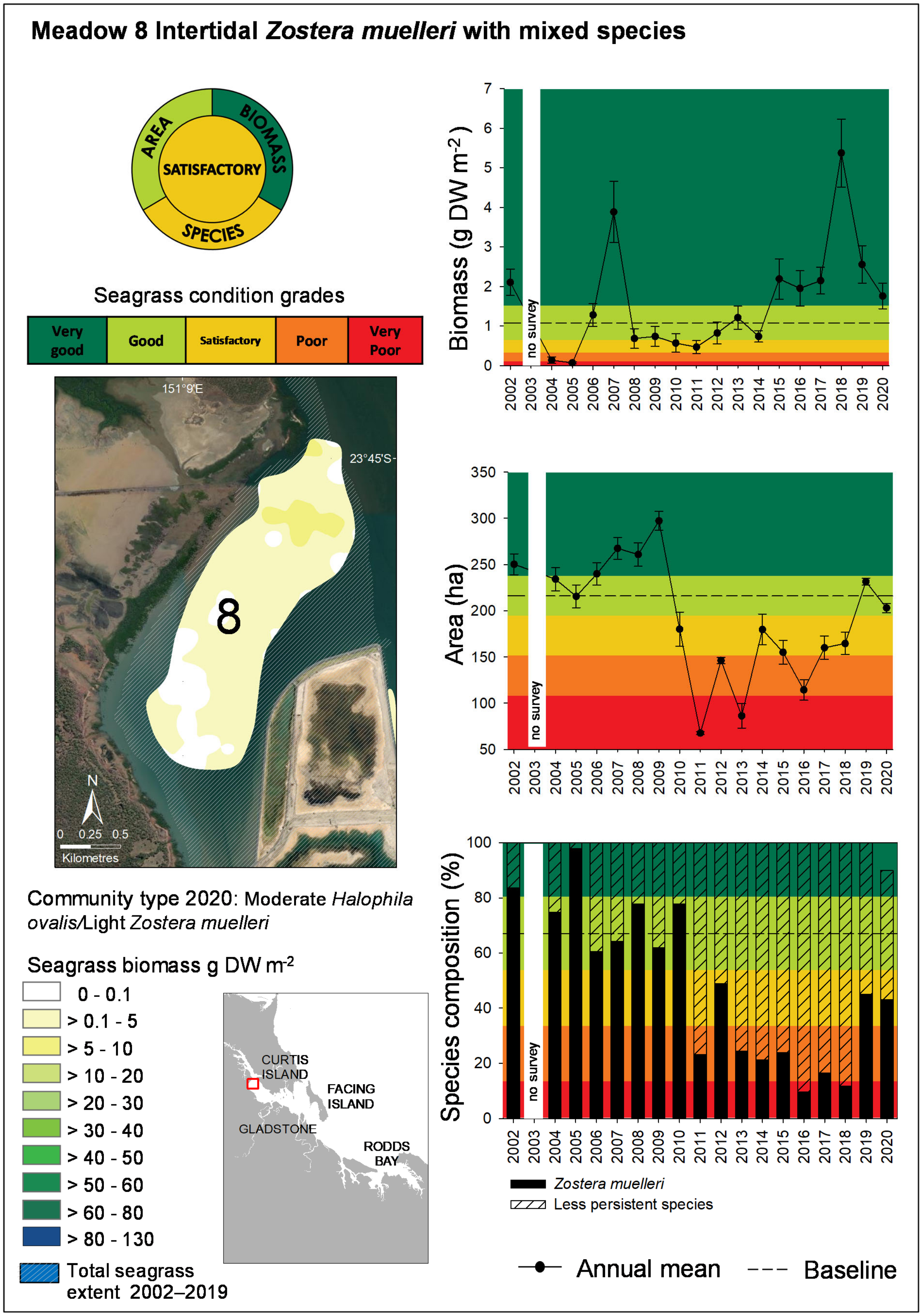


Figure 16. Changes in meadow area, biomass and species composition for Meadow 8, North Fisherman's Landing (Western Basin Zone), 2002–2020 (biomass error bars = SE; area error bars = "R" reliability estimate).

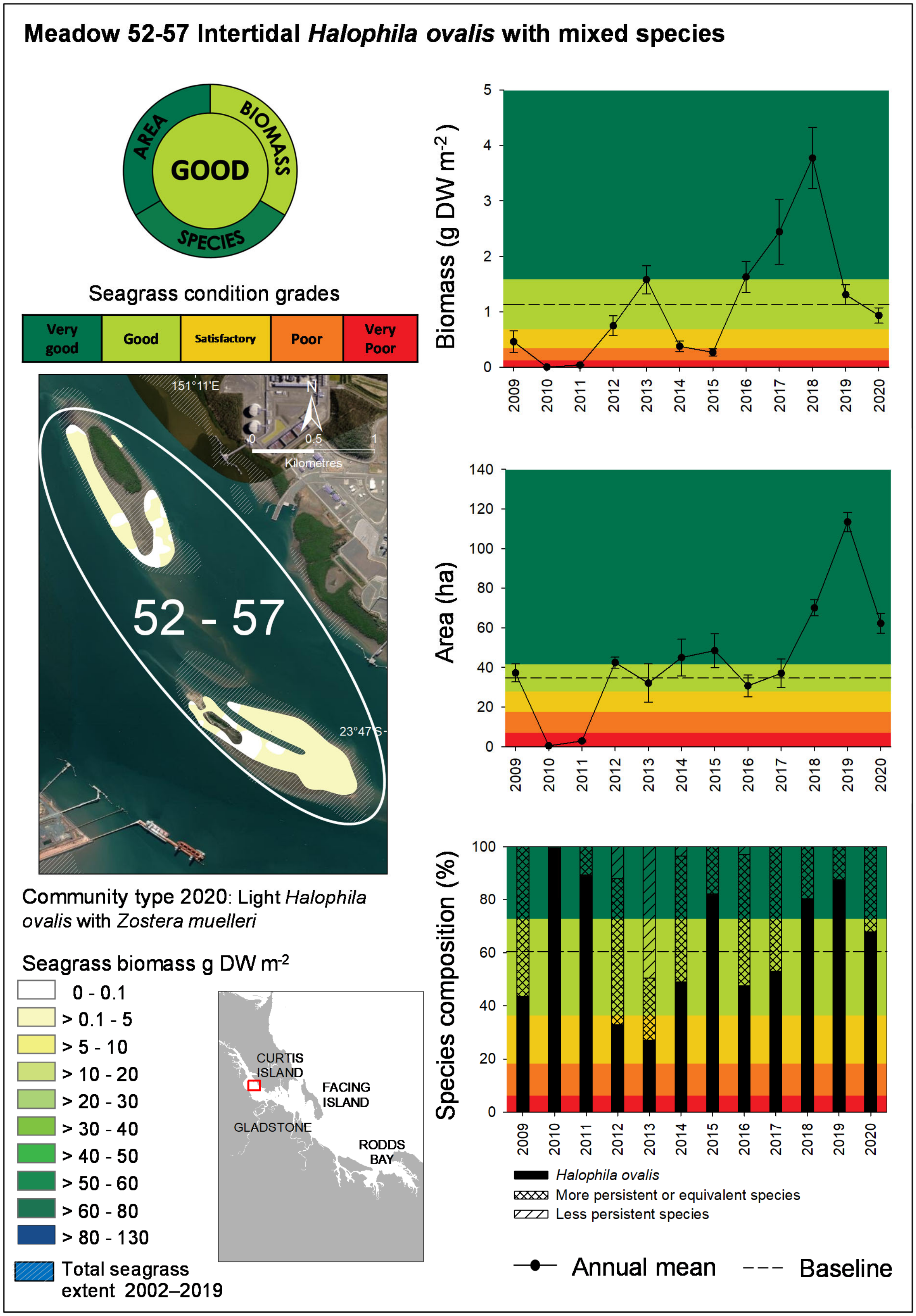


Figure 17. Changes in meadow area, biomass and species composition for Meadows 52-57, Passage Islands (Western Basin Zone), 2002–2020 (biomass error bars = SE; area error bars = "R" reliability estimate).

3.2.3 Inner Harbour long-term monitoring meadows

There is a single monitoring meadow at the Inner Harbour that stretches along the intertidal bank west from the mouth of the Calliope River (Meadow 58; Figure 18).

Meadow 58

Seagrass meadow condition was satisfactory which was lower than 2019, driven by a decrease in biomass and species composition (Figure 18). Meadow area was 51.87 ± 3.96 ha, lower than the record peak in 2019, but still in very good condition (Figure 18). Biomass decreased to 0.99 ± 0.14 g DW m^{-2}; satisfactory condition and species composition was scored the same; satisfactory condition. The proportion *Z. muelleri* contributed to meadow biomass was lower than 2019 but higher than any year since 2009 (Figure 23; Appendix 4).

3.2.4 Mid Harbour long-term monitoring meadows

There are two monitoring meadows in the Mid Harbour Zone, a large intertidal meadow on Pelican Banks (Meadow 43; Figure 19), and a subtidal meadow along the eastern side of Quoin Island (Meadow 48; Figure 20).

Meadow 43:

Meadow 43 is recognised as the largest, most productive, and most stable seagrass meadow in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay based on a 17 year monitoring dataset. In 2020, the meadow's overall poor score is unchanged for the sixth consecutive year, driven by poor biomass condition over these years (Figure 19). Seagrass area remains very good covering 667.31 ± 12.97 ha but meadow biomass remains poor at 5.51 ± 0.67 g DW m^{-2} (Figure 19). Species composition continued to decline for the sixth consecutive year with persistent *Z. muelleri* now only accounting for 49% of the meadow biomass (Figure 19; Appendix 4).

Meadow 48:

Meadow 48 is a predominantly subtidal meadow on the eastern side of Quoin Island. Overall meadow condition was satisfactory driven by a decline in biomass to below baseline levels (Figure 20). Meadow area was 224.15 ± 4.10 ha and in good condition despite being lower than in 2019 and below the ten year baseline of 240 ha. Biomass decreased for the second year in a row and was the lowest since 2015. For the first time since 2011 the dominant species in the meadow was the persistent *H. uninervis* which contributed 99% of the biomass (Figure 20). This is the first time since 2011 that species composition has been above the historical baseline reversing a long term decline in species composition.

3.2.5 South Trees Inlet long-term monitoring meadows

Meadow 60, the only monitoring meadow in this zone, is located between the two wharves at South Trees Inlet (Figure 21). The intertidal meadow traditionally comprises continuous *Z. muelleri*.

Meadow 60

The intertidal meadow was in very good condition for the fourth consecutive year (Figure 21). Meadow biomass, area and species composition were all above baseline levels and considered in very good condition. Meadow area was 12.72 ± 0.84 ha the largest recorded in the program. The meadow comprised entirely of the persistent *Z. muelleri* for the first time since 2014 (Figure 21).

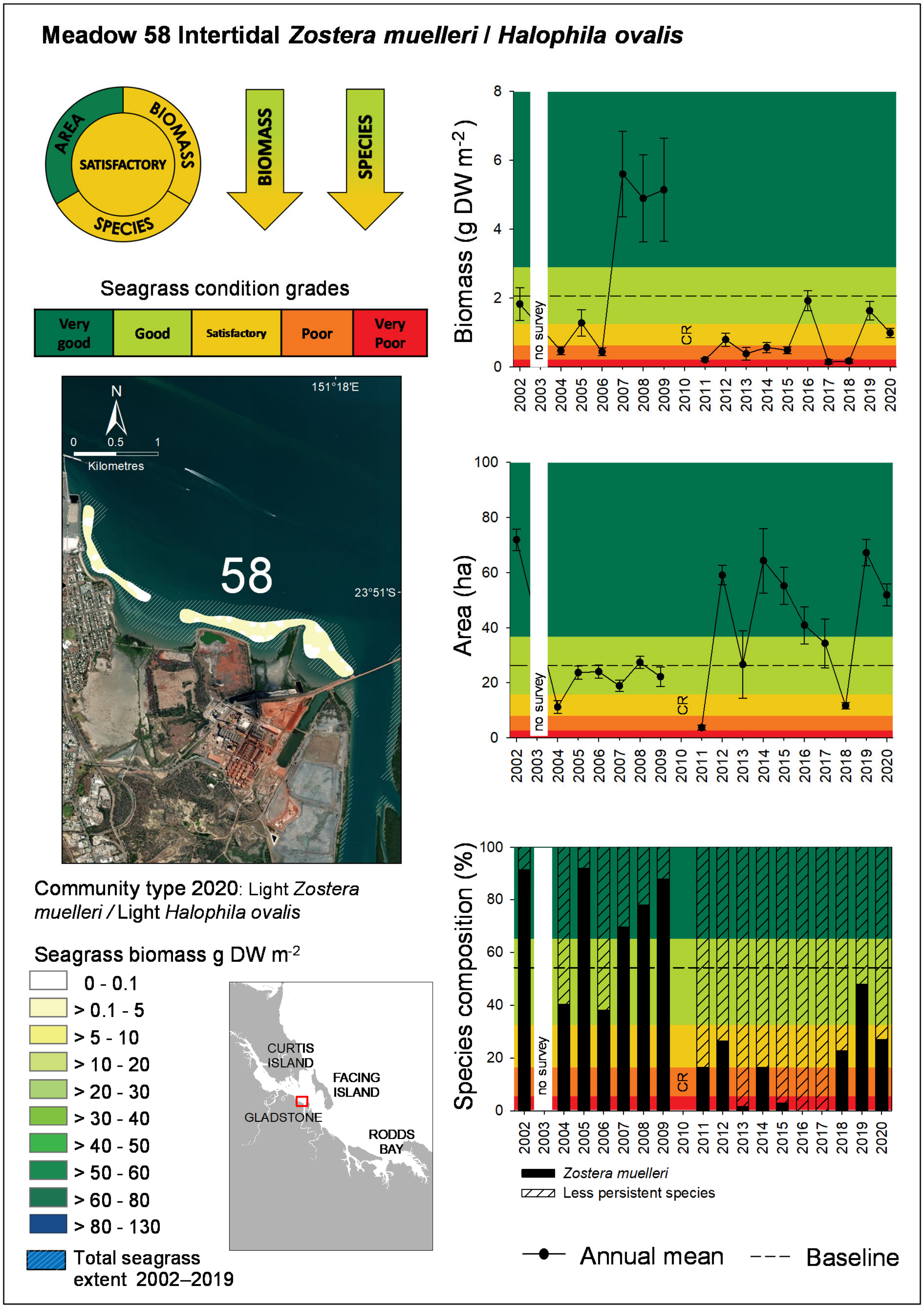


Figure 18. Changes in meadow area, biomass and species composition for Meadow 58, (Inner Harbour Zone), 2002–2020 (biomass error bars = SE; area error bars = "R" reliability estimate). CR = calculation restriction due to the absence of seagrass.

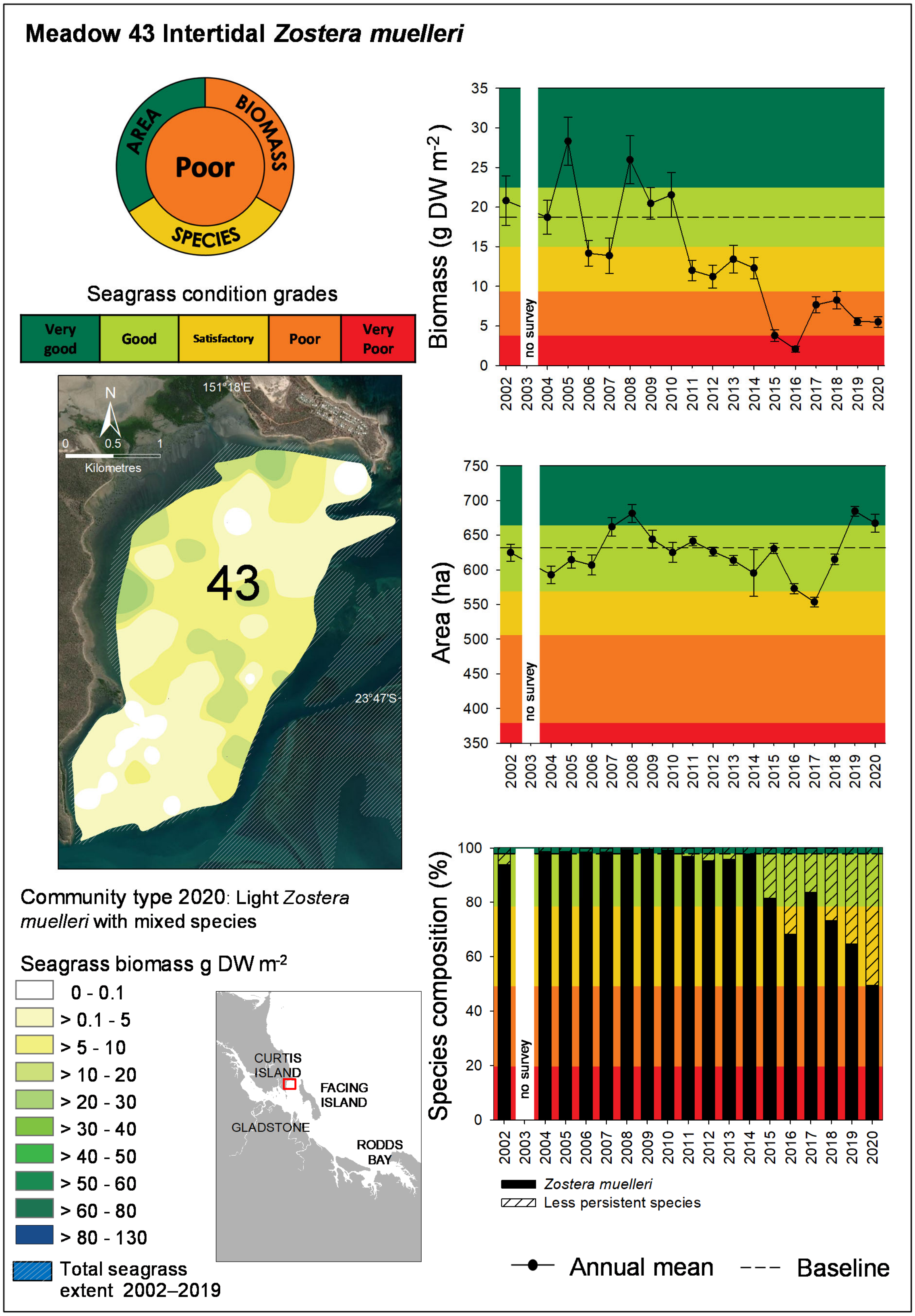


Figure 219. Changes in meadow area, biomass and species composition Meadow 43, Pelican Banks (Mid Harbour Zone), 2002–2020 (biomass error bars = SE; area error bars = "R" reliability estimate).

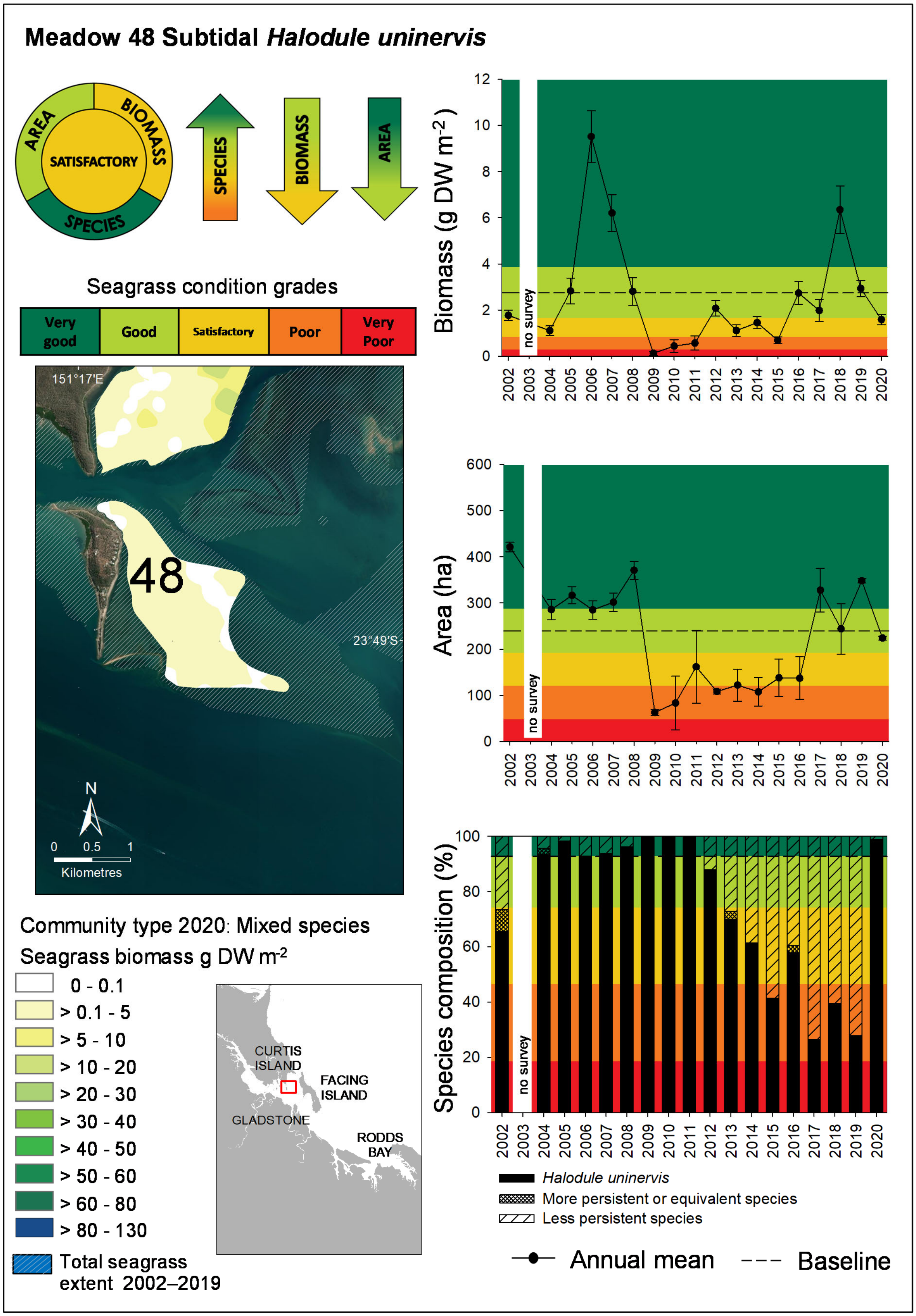


Figure 20. Changes in meadow area, biomass and species composition Meadow 48, Quoin Island (Mid Harbour Zone), 2002–2020 (biomass error bars = SE; area error bars = "R" reliability estimate).

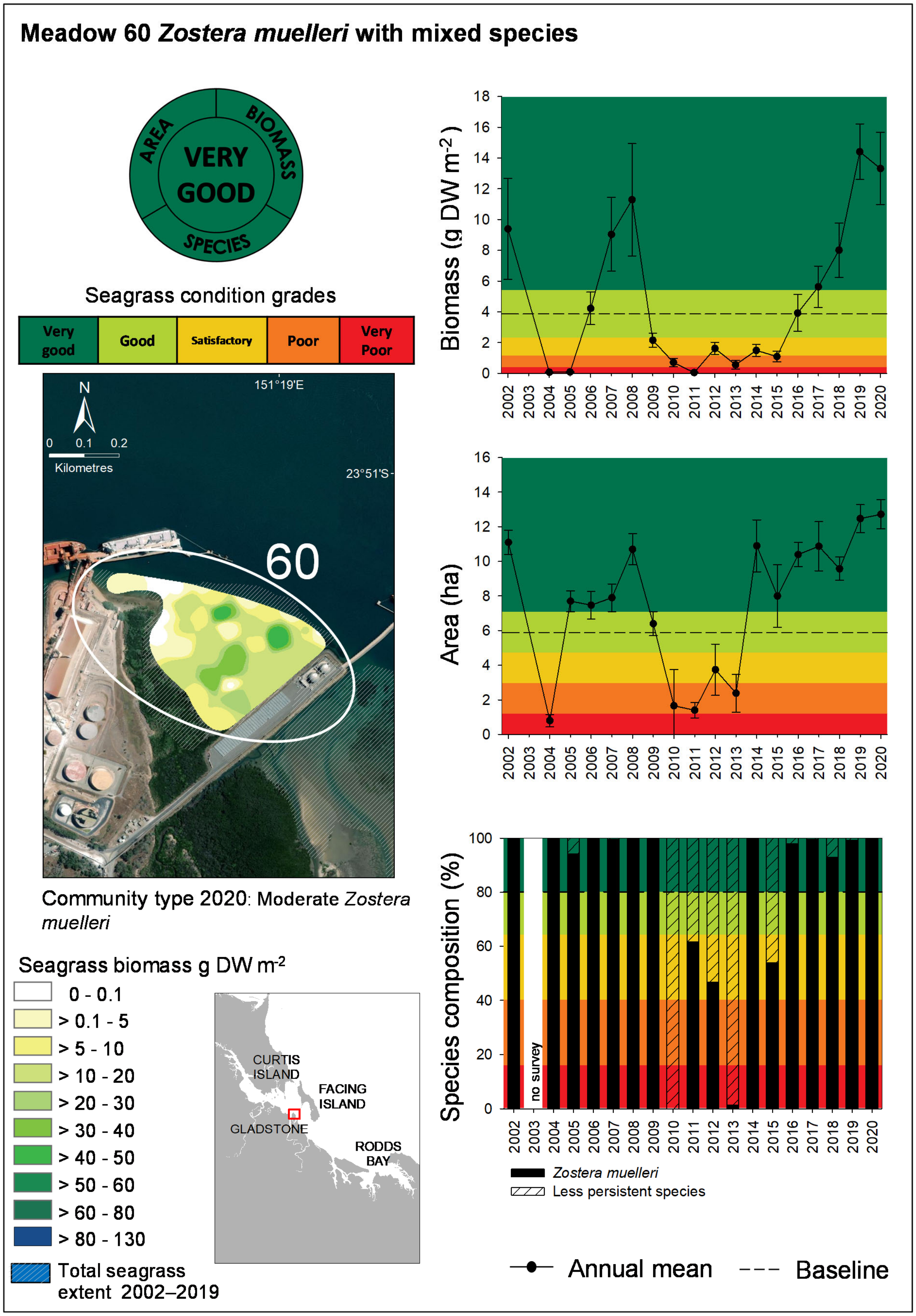


Figure 21. Changes in meadow area, biomass and species composition for Meadow 60, South Trees Inlet Zone, 2002–2020 (biomass error bars = SE; area error bars = "R" reliability estimate).

3.2.6 Rodds Bay long-term monitoring meadows

Monitoring seagrass in Rodds Bay provides an opportunity to measure seagrass health in an area that is not exposed to port activities. Since the inception of the monitoring program three meadows in Rodds Bay have been monitored as reference areas to compare to meadows within the port (Figures 22-24).

Meadow 94:

Meadow 94 is a small monitoring meadow in Rodds Bay consisting of continuous *Z. muelleri*. Meadow area continued to improve for the fourth consecutive year and now covers 3.25 ± 0.39 ha and received a very good score for the second consecutive year (Figure 22). Meadow composition was almost exclusively *Z. muelleri* and maintained a score of very good. Meadow biomass decreased from a peak in 2019 to be 12.25 ± 3.08 g DW m^{-2} and was considered in good condition. Meadow biomass has been the highest since 2008 over the last two years (Figure 22).

Meadow 96:

Meadow 96 is the largest meadow in Rodds Bay and covers an area of 391.68 ± 13.11 ha. Seagrass condition in meadow 96 followed a similar trend to meadow 94 where area and species composition remained similar to 2019 and were in very good condition but there was a decline in biomass to baseline levels (Figure 23). The change in biomass resulted in the overall condition of the meadow to be rated as good rather than very good as it was in 2019 (Figure 23; Appendix 3). Meadow area has been the highest recorded in the program for the last two years (Figure 23; Appendix 3) Species composition was almost exclusively (99%) *Z. muelleri* and for the second consecutive year was above baseline levels.

Meadow 104:

Overall condition of Meadow 104 was satisfactory due to a decline in biomass (Figure 24). Biomass declined from 11.70 ± 1.95 g DW m^{-2} in 2019 to 2.60 ± 0.90 g DW m^{-2} in 2020. Species composition was slightly below baseline levels, but were still in good condition with the persistent *Z. muelleri* contributing 96% of meadow biomass (Figure 24). Meadow area was in very good condition for the second consecutive year. This is the first time since 2009 that area has been above the baseline for consecutive years (Figure 24; Appendix 3).

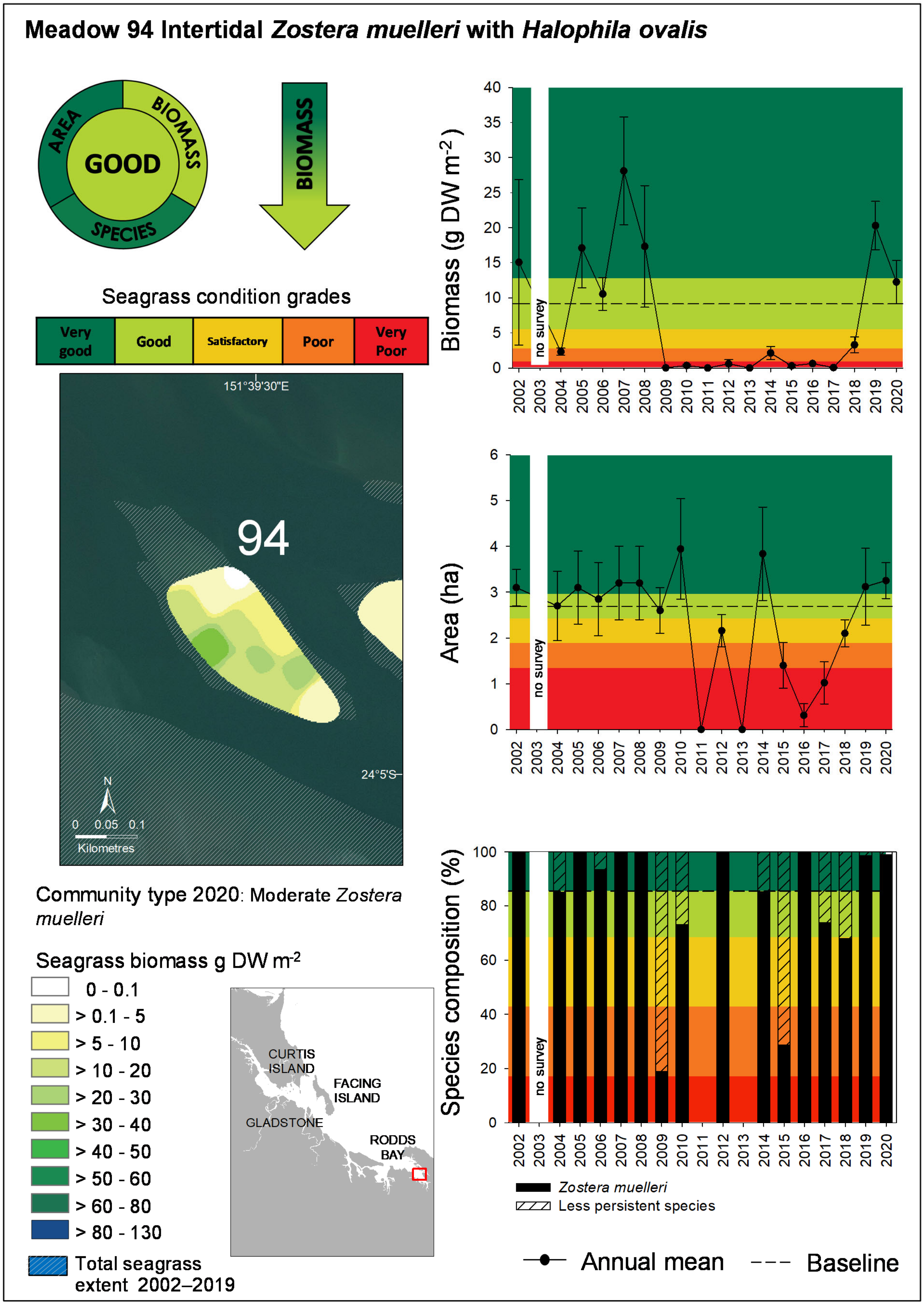


Figure 22. Changes in meadow area, biomass and species composition for Meadow 94, Rodds Bay Zone, 2002–2020 (biomass error bars = SE; area error bars = "R" reliability estimate).

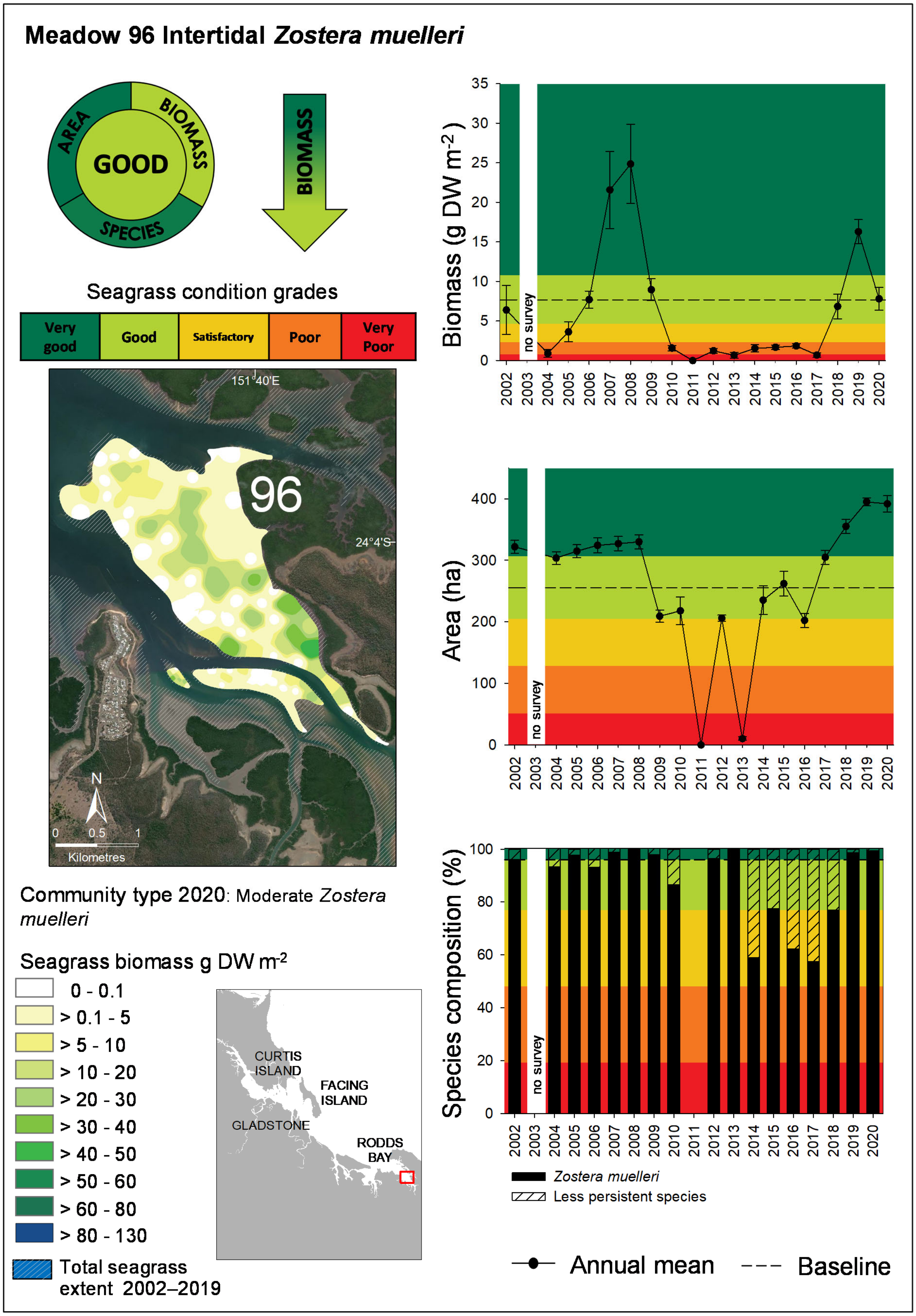


Figure 23. Changes in meadow area, biomass and species composition for Meadow 96, Rodds Bay Zone, 2002–2020 (biomass error bars = SE; area error bars = "R" reliability estimate).

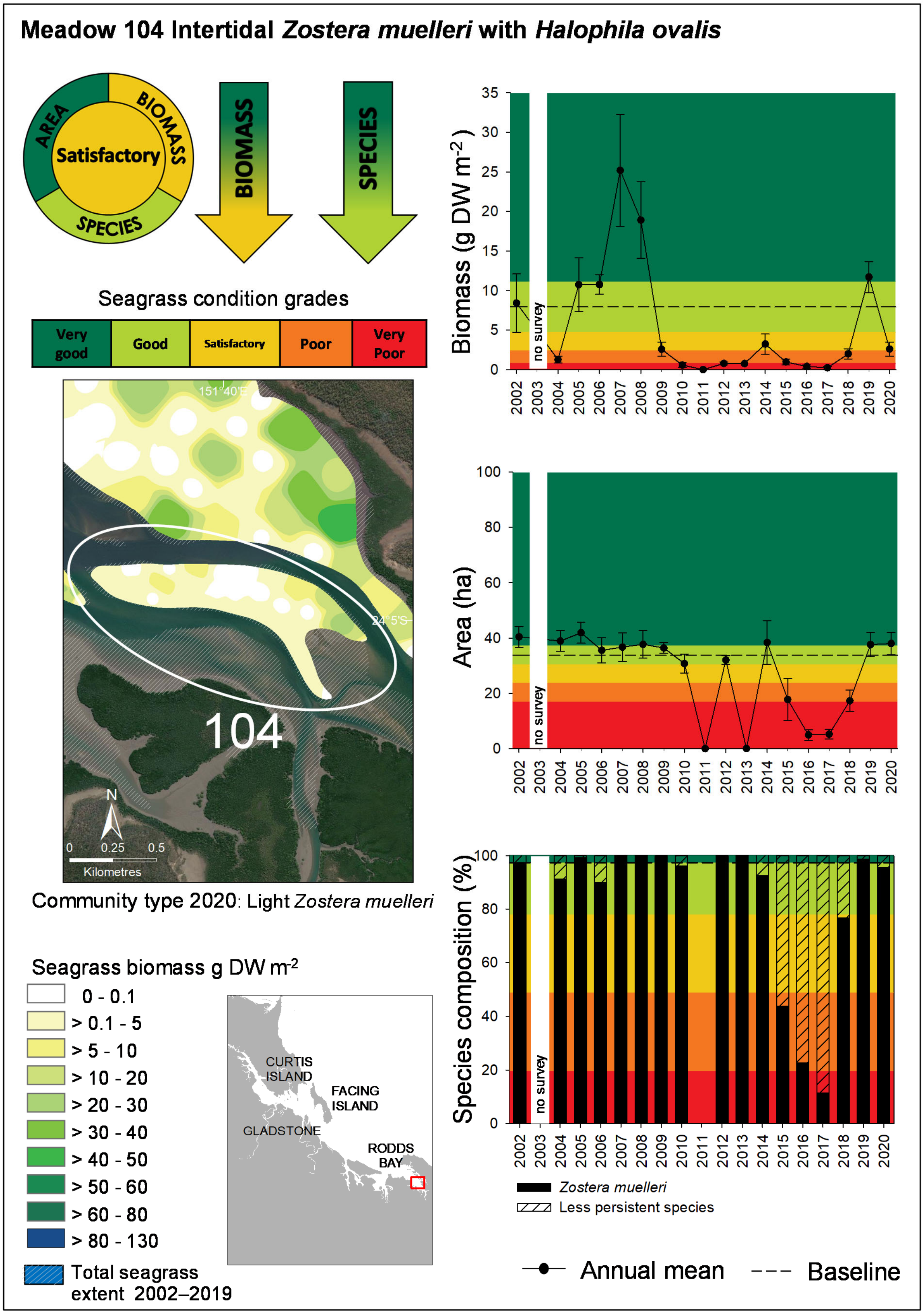
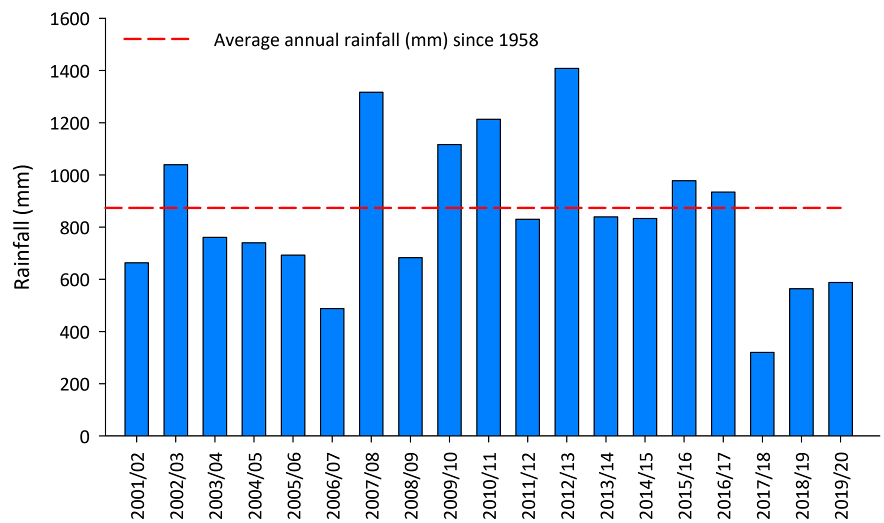


Figure 24. Changes in meadow area, biomass and species composition for Meadow 104, Rodds Bay Zone, November 2002–2020 (biomass error bars = SE; area error bars = "R" reliability estimate).

3.3 Gladstone environmental conditions

Total annual rainfall in the 12 months preceding the November 2020 survey was well below average for the third consecutive year (Figure 25a). Wet season conditions were mild over the 2019/20 wet season with below average rainfall (Figure 29b). During the dry season there was above average rainfall from August to October. Although rainfall was above average during these months it was less than 60 mm and were not considered major rainfall. River flow from the Calliope River continues to be very low (Figure 26). Febuary 2020 was the only month that reached average river flow (Figure 26). In all other months, outflow was very low (<10 thousand megalitres). Annual total daytime exposure of seagrass meadows was below average for the second year in a row (Figure 27).

a)



b)

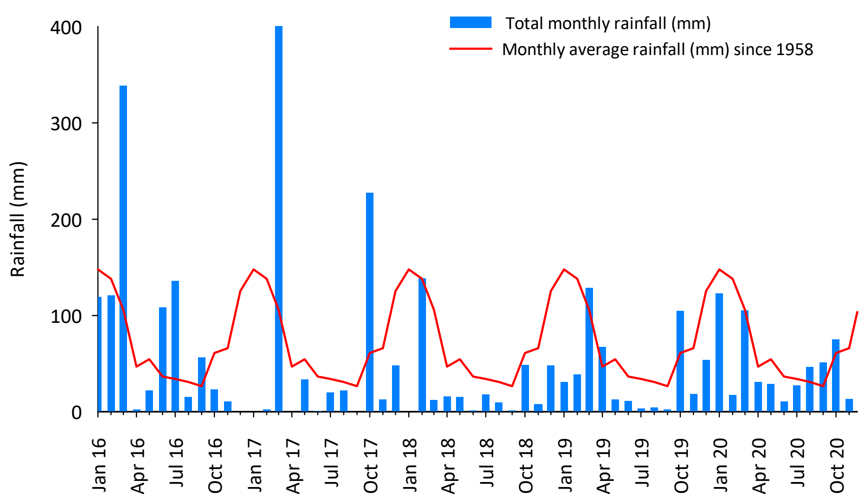


Figure 25. a) Gladstone annual rainfall (mm) and b) monthly rainfall (mm) totals; January 2016–November 2020.

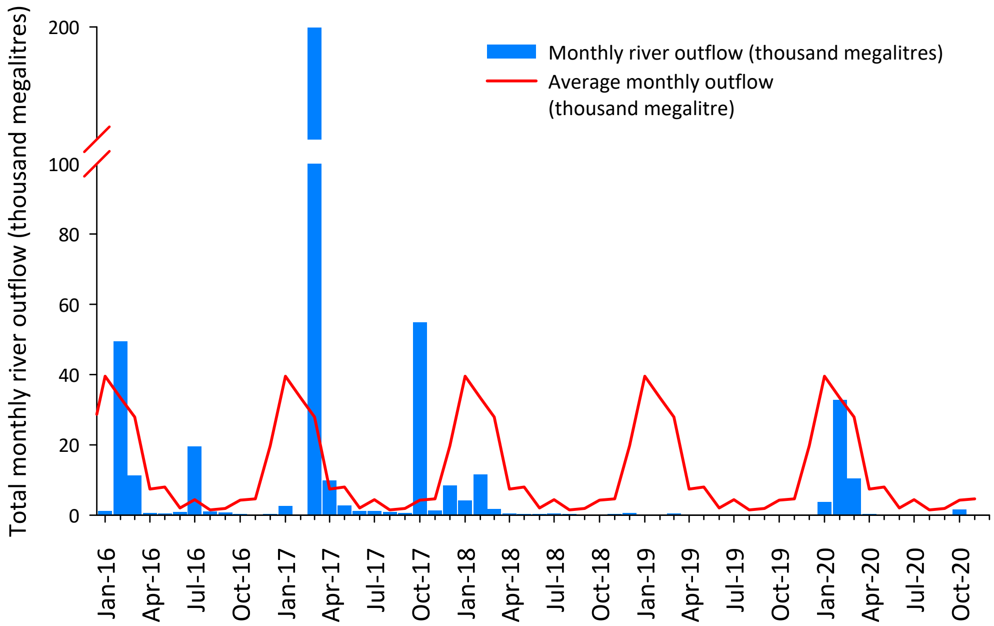


Figure 26. Monthly total river outflow for the Calliope River (thousand megalitres); January 2016–November 2020.

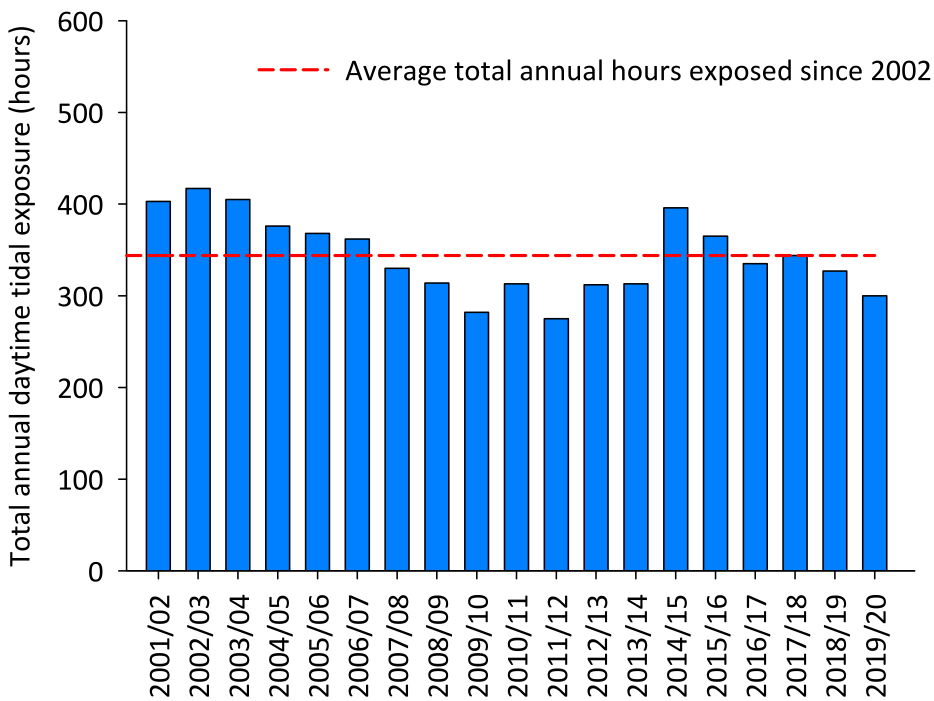


Figure 27. Total annual daytime hours seagrass meadows exposed to air 2001/02 - 2018/19 (daytime hours used 0600 – 1800; <1.0 m below mean sea level).

3 DISCUSSION

4.1 Gladstone seagrass

Seagrass meadows in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay were in an overall good condition for the second consecutive year. This is the first time that seagrass has maintained good condition over consecutive years since 2009, prior to the La Niña and large flooding events that led to significant seagrass declines in 2010-2011. Improvements in seagrass condition since 2016 led to the recovery of most meadows by 2019, when many meadows recorded peak biomass and area values. While there was a decline in biomass in some meadows in 2020 compared to 2019, the majority of meadows remained above baseline levels for the three seagrass metrics and were considered to be in satisfactory or better condition.

Local environmental conditions are a key factor in determining seagrass distribution, biomass and health. Long-term trends in seagrass condition over the past 19 years of annual monitoring reveal a strong relationship with river flow and rainfall in the region. Flow from the Calliope River over the past three years has been below average with very low outflow during the 2020 wet season. Similarly, rainfall has been below average since 2017. Seagrass has specific light requirements for photosynthesis and growth (Chartrand et al. 2016, 2018). Turbidity associated with rainfall and river outflow reduces benthic light conditions inhibiting seagrass growth and ultimately leads to plant death. Under low rainfall and river outflow conditions light quality remains high allowing seagrass growth and recovery such as in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay over the last three years. Additionally, reduced tidal exposure in 2020 also protected intertidal seagrasses from any extreme desiccation and thermal stress enabling growth and survival (Unsworth et al. 2012). If dry conditions persist in 2021, we would expect seagrass condition to remain stable and continue to improve.

Port dredging operations may alter benthic light conditions which can result in seagrass decline (Chartrand et al. 2016, Wu et al. 2018). The timing, frequency and duration of dredging operations play a major role in determining what impact, if any, they have on seagrass meadows and careful management of dredging operations can limit these (Chartrand et al 2016, Wu et al. 2018). In 2020, approximately 800,000 m^3 of seabed material was removed from the Clinton Channel as part of capital works and 256,000 m^3 in maintenance dredging throughout the length of the shipping channel. In Gladstone, maintenance dredging occurs over relatively short timeframes and generally within the period of resilience to light impacts for local seagrasses. The duration of capital dredging is longer, but was managed to ensure the local light requirements of seagrasses were met throughout the campaign (Chartrand et al. 2016). While there was a small decline in biomass at some meadows in the Western Basin and Inner Harbour, the meadow closest to the capital dredge activity (meadow 4) remained in very good condition suggesting there was no impact on seagrass from the dredge operations. Small declines in seagrass meadow biomass were not restricted to the port limits but also observed at the reference meadows in Rodds Bay. Similar low-level declines across the survey area, regardless of proximity to the dredging operations, suggest that they are related to regional conditions rather than port operations.

Pelican Banks meadow (Meadow 43) continues to be in poor condition for the sixth consecutive year and has shown no indication of improving biomass or species composition. Pelican Banks is historically the largest, high biomass seagrass meadow in Port Curtis. While the area of seagrass coverage remained large and in very good condtion in 2020, biomass continues to be well below baseline levels (> 10 g DW m^{-2}) and the proportion that the persistent *Z. muelleri* contributes to the meadow biomass continues to decline. The trend of declining *Z. muelleri* to less persistant low biomass species has direct conserquences for meadow biomass. *Zostera muelleri* has much greater biomass than the other species in the meadow (e.g. *H. uninervis*, *H. ovalis*) and therefore biomass will remain in poor condition until the contribution of *Z. muelleri* improves. There were no obvious differences in environmental conditions or changed human activities in this area compared to the rest of Port Curtis that has prevented seagrass recovery on Pelican Banks. In fact, the Pelican Banks meadows typically experience the best water quality conditions for seagrass meadows in the region based on historical monitoring of benthic light (Chartrand et al. 2016). One of the most likely explanations could be high levels of herbivory from dugong and green turtles. The Pelican Banks meadow has high levels of herbivory from dugong and turtle with dugong feeding trails regularly observed within the meadow (Rasheed et al. 2017) and direct observations of green turtles also feeding on the meadow (direct observations and Hamann et al. 2016; Limpus et al. 2017). Recent research using herbivore exclusion cages has found the impact of herbivores on both seagrass biomass and canopy height were greater at Pelican Banks than other meadows within Port Curtis and Rodds Bay (Scott et al. 2021a). It has been suggested that megaherbivores target areas of high biomass which may explain high levels of herbivory in the past, but it is unclear why high grazing pressure has continued as biomass decreases (Rasheed et al. 2017). Major meadow losses have occurred in other locations around the world as a direct result of turtle herbivory (Christianen et al. 2014) and it is the most likely mechanism preventing the recovery of seagrass biomass at Pelican Banks.

Widespread use of the Port Curtis and Rodds Bay seagrass meadows by feeding dugong and green turtles indicate seagrass in the region is a valuable food source to megaherbivore populations (Scott et al. 2021a, b). The prevalence of dugong feeding trails and turtle sightings in the harbour suggest megaherbivore grazing/cropping may be an important component of the overarching drivers of seagrass condition in not just the Pelican Banks meadow, but in other port zones (Scott et al. 2021a, b).

4.2 Comparisons with Queensland-wide monitoring program

The continued good condition of seagrass meadows in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay was consistent with seagrass trends along Queensland's east coast between Cairns and Port Curtis. Seagrass has generally returned to healthy conditions recorded before widespread losses of seagrasses occurred along the east coast in 2009/2010 coinciding with above average rainfall, river flow, and severe tropical cyclones (TC) from extended La Niña weather patterns (York et al. 2016; Reason et al. 2017a; McKenna et al. 2017; Bryant et al. 2019). While there has been a trend of recovery over recent years, localised climate events have had a major impact on seagrass outcomes around the state. Both Cairns and Townsville received below average rainfall and mild condition in 2020 leading to the best seagrass condition in Cairns in over a decade and improved biomass throughout Townsville (Reason et al. 2021; McKenna et al. 2021). This is in contrast to severe localised flooding occurred in the Townsville region in 2019, which led to a decline in seagrass meadows in that year (McKenna et al. 2020). In contrast, Mourilyan Harbour has shown little recovery after complete meadow loss in 2010/2011 and seagrass remains in very poor condition with little prospect of seagrass recovery without some form of restoration (Van de Wetering et al. 2020).

In this context the Port Curtis and Rodds Bay seagrasses were one of the better outcomes for seagrass condition in Queensland in 2020.

4.3 Implications for port management

Results of this latest annual survey, have found seagrasses to be in a good condition compared with the 19 year monitoring history. With the exception of Pelican Banks, all seagrass monitoring meadows were at satisfactory to very good condition with the majority of meadows having recovered to pre 2010 condition. The seagrass dynamics observed in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay over the past 3 years is consistent with the major climate drivers of seagrass change seen elsewhere in North Queensland and the continued use of the meadows by dugongs and green turtles are signs of a functional seagrass ecosytem. As recognised indicators of overall marine environmental health (Dennison et al. 1993), the good condition of seagrasses in 2020 point toward a healthy marine environment for Port Curtis and Rodds Bay.

In Port Curtis and Rodds Bay, maintenance of seagrass species composition and biomass above baseline levels, and the continual improvement in spatial footprint over the past two years is likely to have increased the resilience of seagrass meadows to future impacts. Sustained periods of high biomass will lead to increased reproductive effort and replenish seed banks in the region, particularly for *Z. muelleri.* Larger seed banks further increase seagrass meadow resilience to impacts by increasing their capacity for recovery (Reason et al. 2017b). Continuing high levels of resilience mean seagrasses were well placed to cope with forecast La Niña weather patterns and anthropogenic pressures in 2021 including planned maintenance and capital dredging activities.

Maintaining light environments that are sufficient for seagrass growth is the key driver of seagrass condition in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay, and elsewhere in Queensland. Activities that could reduce water quality in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay should be managed in such a way as to ensure water quality and particularly benthic light is sufficient for seagrass growth. In Port Curtis, substantial work has been done to develop relevant light requirement thresholds for the local seagrasses and these are implemented by GPC as part of routine management requirements during port activities to protect seagrasses (Chartrand et al. 2012; 2016).

Over the past decade seagrass meadows in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay have undergone repeated disturbances from climate, floods, cyclones and anthropogenic activities but have maintained their historical extent and have now recovered their biomass and species composition. Improvements in biomass and the return of more persistent species to meadows over the past two years, suggest seagrasses will be more resilient to future pressures or impacts than over the previous decade. The improvement in seagrasses is a strong foundation supporting marine productivity and species reliant on seagrasses for food and shelter and we expect that their condition would be maintained in 2021 should favourable environmental conditions prevail.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Seagrass Condition Index

Baseline Calculations

Baseline conditions for seagrass biomass, meadow area and species composition were established from annual means calculated over the first 10 years of monitoring (2002–2012; nb. no survey conducted in 2003). This baseline was set based on results of the Port Curtis and Rodds Bay 2014 pilot report card (Bryant et al. 2014b). The 2002–2012 period incorporates a range of conditions present in Port Curtis and Rodds Bay, including El Niño and La Niña periods, and multiple extreme rainfall and river flow events (Carter et al. 2015a). The 10 year long-term average will be reassessed each decade.

Baseline conditions for species composition were determined based on the annual percent contribution of each species to mean meadow biomass of the baseline years. The meadow was classified as either single species dominated (one species comprising ≥80% of baseline species), or mixed species (all species comprise <80% of baseline species composition). Where a meadow baseline contained an approximately equal split in two dominant species (i.e. both species accounted for 40–60% of the baseline), the baseline was set according to the percent composition of the more persistent/stable species of the two (see Grade and Score Calculations section and Figure A1).

Meadow Classification

A meadow classification system was developed for the three condition indicators (biomass, area, species composition) in recognition that for some seagrass meadows these measures are historically stable, while in other meadows they are relatively variable. The coefficient of variation (CV) for each baseline for each meadow was used to determine historical variability. Meadow biomass and species composition were classified as either stable or variable (Table A1). Meadow area was classified as either highly stable, stable, variable, or highly variable (Table A1). The CV was calculated by dividing the standard deviation of the baseline years by the baseline for each condition indicator.

Table A1. Coefficient of variation (CV) thresholds used to classify historical stability or variability of meadow biomass, area and species composition.

Indicator	Class			
	Highly stable	Stable	Variable	Highly variable
Biomass	-	CV < 40%	CV ≥ 40%	-
Area	< 10%	CV ≥ 10, < 40%	CV ≥ 40, <80%	CV ≥ 80%
Species composition	-	CV < 40%	CV ≥ 40%	-

Threshold Definition

Seagrass condition for each indicator was assigned one of five grades (very good (A), good (B), satisfactory (C), poor (D), very poor (E)). Threshold levels for each grade were set relative to the baseline and based on meadow class. This approach accounted for historical variability within the monitoring meadows and expert knowledge of the different meadow types and assemblages in the region (Table A2).

Table A2. Threshold levels for grading seagrass indicators for various meadow classes relative to the baseline. Upwards/ downwards arrows are included where a change in condition has occurred in any of the three condition indicators (biomass, area, species composition) from the previous year.

Seagrass condition indicators/ Meadow class		Seagrass grade				
		A Very good	B Good	C Satisfactory	D Poor	E Very Poor
Biomass	Stable	>20% above	20% above - 20% below	20-50% below	50-80% below	>80% below
	Variable	>40% above	40% above - 40% below	40-70% below	70-90% below	>90% below
Area	Highly stable	>5% above	5% above - 10% below	10-20% below	20-40% below	>40% below
	Stable	>10% above	10% above - 10% below	10-30% below	30-50% below	>50% below
	Variable	>20% above	20% above - 20% below	20-50% below	50-80% below	>80% below
	Highly variable	> 40% above	40% above - 40% below	40-70% below	70-90% below	>90% below
Species composition	Stable and variable; Single species dominated	>0% above	0-20% below	20-50% below	50-80% below	>80% below
	Stable; Mixed species	>20% above	20% above - 20% below	20-50% below	50-80% below	>80% below
	Variable; Mixed species	>20% above	20% above- 40% below	40-70% below	70-90% below	>90% below
	Increase above threshold from previous year	BIOMASS ↑		Decrease below threshold from previous year	BIOMASS ↓	

Grade and Score Calculations

A score system (0–1) and score range was applied to each grade to allow numerical comparisons of seagrass condition among meadows, Port Curtis Zones, and for the Port Curtis region (Table A3; see Carter et al. 2016; Carter et al. 2015b for a detailed description).

Score calculations for each meadow's condition required calculating the biomass, area and species composition for that year (see Baseline Calculations section), allocating a grade for each indicator by comparing 2017 values against meadow-specific thresholds for each grade, then scaling biomass, area and species composition values against the prescribed score range for that grade.

Scaling was required because the score range in each grade was not equal (Table A3). Within each meadow, the upper limit for the very good grade (score = 1) for species composition was set as 100% (as a species could never account for >100% of species composition). For biomass and area the upper limit was set as the maximum mean plus standard error (SE; i.e. the top of the error bar) value for a given year, compared among years during the baseline period.

An example of calculating a meadow score for biomass in satisfactory condition is provided in Appendix 2.

Table A3. Score range and grading colours used in the Port Curtis and Rodds Bay report card.

Grade	Description	Score Range	
		Lower bound	Upper bound

A	Very good	≥0.85	1.00
B	Good	≥0.65	<0.85
C	Satisfactory	≥0.50	<0.65
D	Poor	≥0.25	<0.50
E	Very poor	0.00	<0.25

Where species composition was determined to be anything less than in "perfect" condition (i.e. a score <1), a decision tree was used to determine whether equivalent and/or more persistent species were driving this grade/score (Table A1). If this was the case then the species composition score and grade for that year was recalculated including those species. Concern regarding any decline in the stable state species should be reserved for those meadows where the directional change from the stable state species is of concern (Figure A1). This would occur when the stable state species is replaced by species considered to be earlier colonisers. Such a shift indicates a decline in meadow stability (e.g. a shift from *Z. muelleri* subsp. *capricorni* to *H. ovalis*). An alternate scenario can occur where the stable state species is replaced by what is considered an equivalent species (e.g. shifts between *Cymodocea rotundata* and *Cymodocea serrulata*), or replaced by a species indicative of an improvement in meadow stability (e.g. a shift from *H. decipiens* to *H. uninervis* or any other species). The directional change assessment was based largely on dominant traits of colonising, opportunistic and persistent seagrass genera described by Kilminster et al. (2015). Adjustments to the Kilminster model included: (1) positioning *Syringodium isoetifolium* further towards the colonising species end of the list, as successional studies following disturbance demonstrate this is an early coloniser in Queensland seagrass meadows (Rasheed 2004); and (2) separating and ordering the *Halophila* genera by species. Shifts between *Halophila* species are ecologically relevant; for example, a shift from *H. ovalis* to *H. decipiens*, the most marginal species found in Port Curtis, may indicate declines in water quality and available light for seagrass growth as *H decipiens* has a lower light requirement (Collier et al. 2016) (Figure A1).

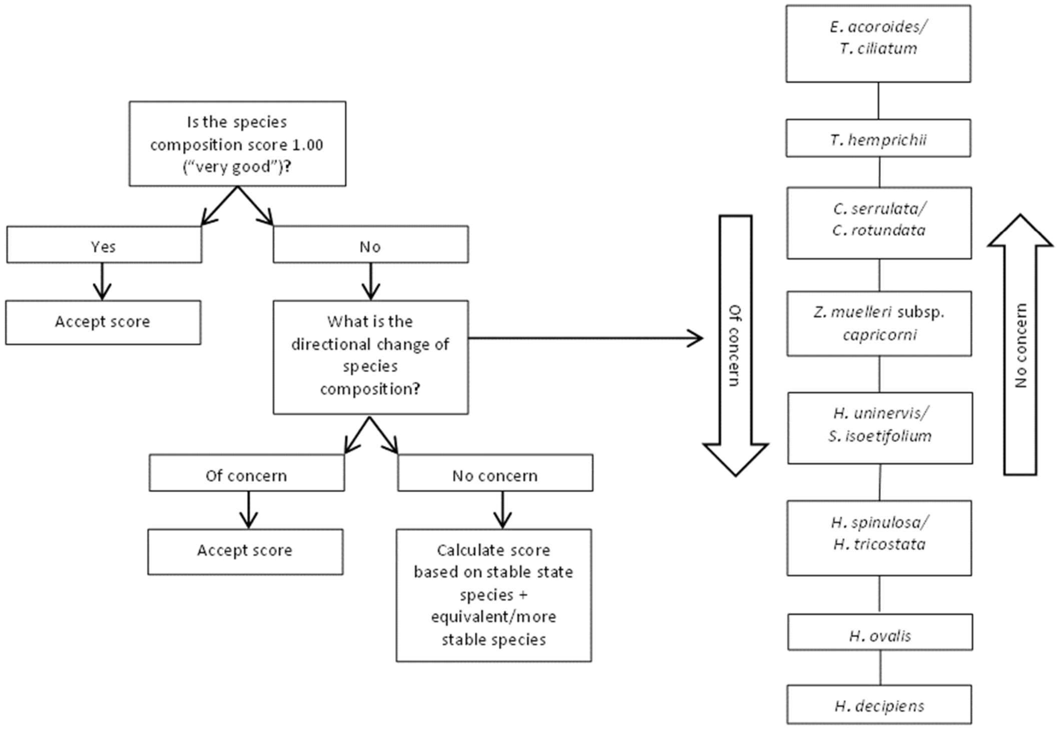


Figure 10. (a) Decision tree and (b) directional change assessment for grading and scoring seagrass species composition.

Score Aggregation

A review in 2017 of how meadow scores were aggregated from the three indicators (biomass, area and species composition) led to a slight modification from previous years' annual report. This change was applied to correct an anomaly that resulted in some meadows receiving a zero score due to species composition, despite having substantial area and biomass. The change acknowledges that species composition is an important characteristic of a seagrass meadow in terms of defining meadow stability, resilience, and ecosystem services, but is not as fundamental as having some seagrass present, regardless of species, when defining overall condition. The overall meadow score was previously defined as the lowest of the three indicator scores (area, biomass or species composition). The new method still defines overall meadow condition as the lowest indicator score where this is driven by biomass or area as previously; however, where species composition was the lowest score, it contributes 50% of the overall meadow score, and the next lowest indicator (area or biomass) contributes the remaining 50%. The calculation of individual indicator scores remains unchanged.

Both seagrass meadow area and biomass are fundamental to describing the condition of a seagrass meadow. A poor condition of either one, regardless of the other, describes a poor seagrass meadow state. Importantly they can and do vary independently of one another. Averaging the indicator scores is not appropriate as in some circumstances the area of a meadow can reduce dramatically to a small remnant, but biomass within the meadow is maintained at a high level. Clearly such a seagrass meadow is in poor condition, but if you were to take an average of the indicators it would come out satisfactory or better. The reverse is true as well, under some circumstances the spatial footprint of a meadow is maintained but the biomass of seagrass within is reduced dramatically, sometimes by an order of magnitude. Again, taking an average of the two would lead to a satisfactory or better score which does not reflect the true state of the meadow. As both of these characteristics are so fundamental as to the condition of a seagrass meadow, the decision was to have the overall meadow score be the lowest of the indicators rather than an average. This method allowed the most conservative estimate of meadow condition to be made (Bryant et al. 2014b).

Seagrass species composition is an important modifier of seagrass meadow state. A change in species to more colonising forms can be a key indicator of disturbance and a meadow in recovery from pressures. As not all seagrass species provide the same services a change in species composition can lead to a change in the function and services a meadow provides. Originally the species composition indicator was considered in the same way as biomass and area, if it was the lowest score, it would inform the overall meadow score. However, while seagrass species is an important modifier it is not as fundamental as the actual presence of seagrass (regardless of species). While the composition may have changed there is still seagrass present to perform at least some of the roles expected of the meadow such a food for dugong and turtle for example. The old approach led to some unintended consequences with some meadows receiving a "0" score despite having good area and biomass simply because the climax species for that meadows base condition had not returned after losses had occurred. So, while it is an important modifier, species composition should not be the sole determinant of the overall meadow score (even when it is the lowest score). As such, the method for rolling up the three indicator scores was modified so that in the circumstances where species composition is the lowest of the three indicators, it contributes 50% of the score, with the other 50% coming from the lower of the two fundamental indicators (biomass and area). This maintains the original design philosophy but provides a 50% reduction in weighting that species composition could effectively contribute.

The change in weighting approach for species composition was tested across all previous years and meadows in Port Curtis as well the other seagrass monitoring locations where we use this scoring methodology (Cairns, Townsville, Abbot Point, Mackay, Hay Point, Mourilyan Harbour, Torres Strait, Weipa and Karumba). A range of different weightings were examined, but the 50% weighting consistently provided the best outcomes. The change resulted in sensible outcomes for meadows where species composition was poor and resulted in overall meadow condition scores that remained credible with minimal impact to the majority of meadow scores across Gladstone (and the other locations), where generally meadow condition has been appropriately described. Changes only impacted the relatively uncommon circumstance where species composition was the lowest of the three indicators. The reduction in weighting should not allow a meadow with very poor species composition to achieve a rating of good, due to the reasons outlined above, and the 50% weighting provided enough power to species composition to ensure this was the achieved compared with other weightings that were tested.

Overall Port Curtis grades/scores were determined by averaging the overall meadow scores for each monitoring meadow within the port, and assigning the corresponding grade to that score (Table A2). Where multiple meadows were present within the port, meadows were not subjected to a weighting system at this stage of the analysis. The meadow classification process applied smaller and therefore more sensitive thresholds for meadows considered stable, and less sensitive thresholds for variable meadows. The classification process served therefore as a proxy weighting system where any condition decline in the (often) larger, stable meadows was more likely to trigger a reduction in the meadow grade compared with the more variable, ephemeral meadows. Port grades are therefore more sensitive to changes in stable than variable meadows.

Appendix 2. Example of Score Calculation

An example of calculating a meadow score for biomass in satisfactory condition.

1. Determine the grade for the current year area value (i.e. satisfactory).

2. Calculate the difference in area (A_{diff}) between the current area value ($A_{current}$) and the area value of the lower threshold boundary for the satisfactory grade ($A_{satisfactory}$):

$$A_{\mathrm{diff}} = A_{\mathrm{current}} - A_{\mathrm{satisfactory}}$$

Where $A_{satisfactory}$ or any other threshold boundary will differ for each condition indicator depending on the baseline value, meadow class (highly stable [area only], stable, variable, highly variable [area only]), and whether the meadow is dominated by a single species or mixed species.

3. Calculate the range for area values (A_{range}) in that grade:

$$A_{\mathrm{range}} = A_{\mathrm{good}} - A_{\mathrm{satisfactory}}$$

Where $A_{satisfactory}$ is the upper threshold boundary for the satisfactory grade.
Note: For species composition, the upper limit for the very good grade is set as 100%. For area and biomass, the upper limit for the very good grade is set as the maximum value of the mean plus the standard error (i.e. the top of the error bar) for a given year during the baseline period for that indicator and meadow.

4. Calculate the proportion of the satisfactory grade (A_{prop}) that $A_{current}$ takes up:

$$A_{\mathrm{prop}} = \frac{A_{\mathrm{diff}}}{A_{\mathrm{range}}}$$

5. Determine the area score for the current year ($Score_{current}$) by scaling A_{prop} against the score range (SR) for the satisfactory grade ($SR_{satisfactory}$), i.e. 0.15 units:

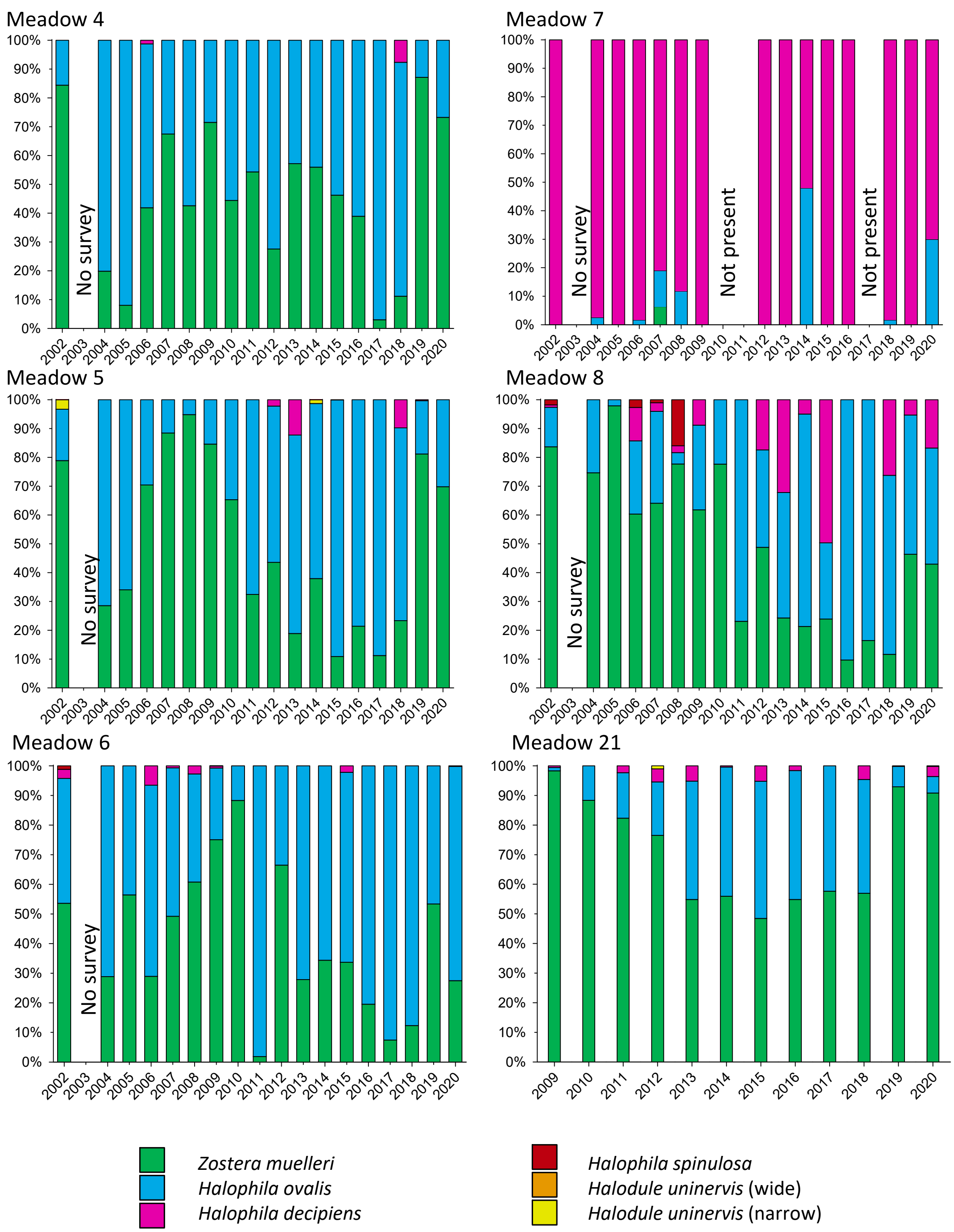
$$\mathrm{Score}_{\mathrm{current}} = \mathrm{LB}_{\mathrm{satisfactory}} + \left(A_{\mathrm{prop}} \times \mathrm{SR}_{\mathrm{satisfactory}}\right)$$

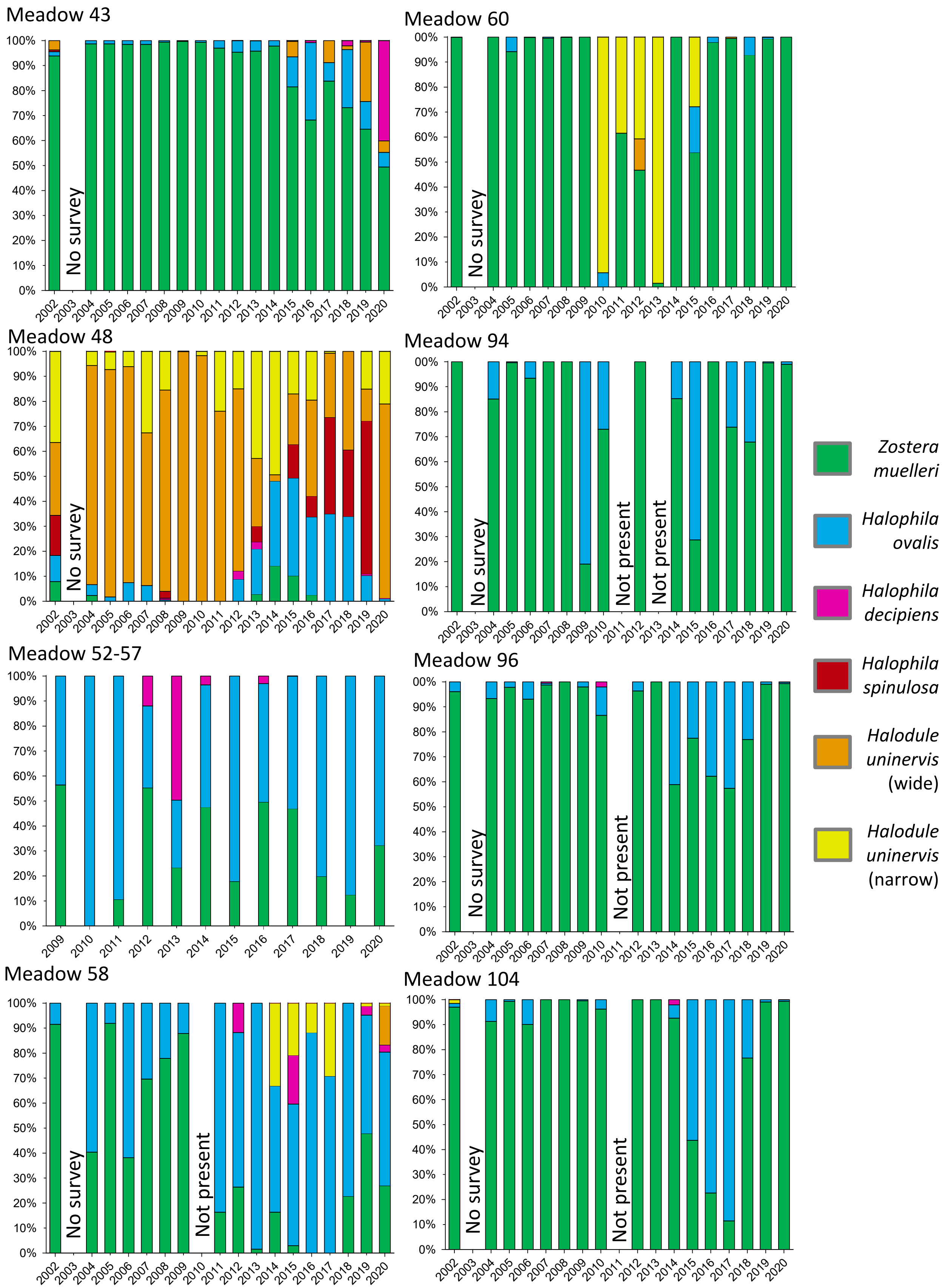
Where $LB_{satisfactory}$ is the defined lower bound (LB) score threshold for the satisfactory grade, i.e. 0.50 units.

Appendix 3. Meadow area and above-ground biomass of Port Curtis and Rodds Bay seagrass meadows 2020

Meadow ID	Biomass ± SE (g DW m^{-2})	Area ± R (ha)	Community Type	Landscape Category	Species Present
8	1.77 ± 0.32	203.01 ± 3.45	Light *Z. muelleri/H. ovalis*	Aggregated patches	*Z. muelleri, H. ovalis, H. decipiens*
52/57	0.93 ± 0.14	62.26 ± 5.00	Light *H. ovalis* with *Z. muelleri*	Aggregated patches	*H. ovalis, Z. muelleri*
21	6.92 ± 1.63	203.71 ± 8.84	Light *Z. muelleri*	Isolated patches	*Z. muelleri, H. ovalis, H. decipiens, H. spinulosa*
6	3.44 ± 0.26	454.58 ± 6.06	Moderate *H. ovalis* with mixed species	Aggregated patches	*H. ovalis, Z. muelleri, H. decipiens*
5	4.04 ± 0.92	145.24 ± 3.02	Light *Z. muelleri/H. ovalis*	Aggregated patches	*Z. muelleri, H. ovalis*
4	2.26 ± 0.72	41.49 ± 1.99	Light *Z. muelleri/H. decipiens*	Isolated patches	*Z. muelleri, H. decipiens*
43	5.50 ± 0.67	667.31 ± 12.97	Light *Z. muelleri* with *H. uninervis*	Aggregated patches	*Z. muelleri, H. uninervis*
48	1.58 ± 0.22	224.15 ± 4.10	Moderate *H. uninervis* with mixed species	Aggregated patches	*H. uninervis (narrow), H. uninervis (wide), H. ovalis, H. decip*
58	0.99 ± 0.14	51.87 ± 3.96	Light *H. ovalis/Z. muelleri*	Aggregated patches	*H. ovalis, Z. muelleri, H. uninervis (narrow), H. decipiens, H. unine*
60	13.32 ± 2.34	12.72 ± 0.84	Light *Z. muelleri*	Continuous cover	*Z. muelleri*
96	7.81 ± 1.43	391.68 ± 13.11	Light *Z. muelleri*	Continuous cover	*Z. muelleri, H. ovalis, H. decipiens*
94	12.25 ± 3.08	3.25 ± 0.39	Light *Z. muelleri*	Continuous cover	*Z. muelleri, H. ovalis*
104	2.60 ± 0.90	38.00 ± 4.03	Light *Z. muelleri*	Aggregated patches	*Z. muelleri, H. ovalis*
7	0.78 ± 0.28	69.99 ± 27.25	Light *H. decipiens* with *H. ovalis*	Aggregated patches	*H. decipiens, H. ovalis*

Appendix 4. Detailed species composition for long term monitoring meadows; 2002–2020




Meadow 43
No survey
Meadow 60
No survey
Meadow 48
No survey
Meadow 94
No survey
Not present
Not present
Meadow 52-57
Meadow 96
No survey
Not present
Meadow 58
No survey
Not present
Meadow 104
No survey
Not present
Zostera muelleri
Halophila ovalis
Halophila decipiens
Halophila spinulosa
Halodule uninervis (wide)
Halodule uninervis (narrow)