

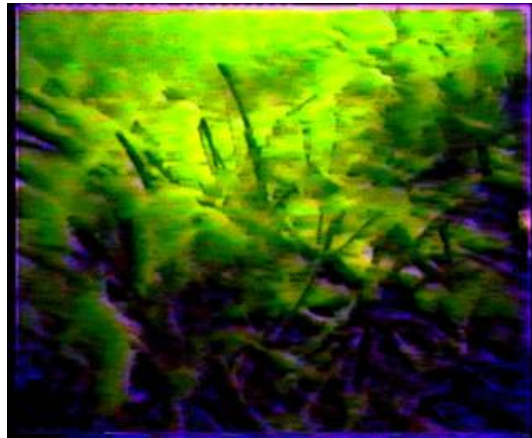
License to Dredge: a poem by Jenni Meredith

Introduction to the poem

The peacock worm (*Sabella pavonina*) is common around UK coasts, which is possibly why its importance in the Stour and Orwell Estuary, Essex, has been largely overlooked until recently. This sub-tidal worm creates strings from wet sand particles, coiling them like a potter into long tubes, where it lives; its colourful fan projecting from the top to catch passing plankton. These fans give rise to its common name, fan worm, though local fishermen know it as 'spaghetti weed'.

The fishermen also know there has been a vast forest of sabella in the Stour and Orwell estuary for over forty years. There is not much fishermen don't know about the waters they fish.

The Eastern Sea Fisheries Joint Committee conducted a video survey in 2003 and was surprised to find 120 hectares of Sabella. The density and extent of these vast forests is unique in British waters, according to Dr. Keith Hiscock, Programme Director for the Marine Life Information Network (MarLIN).



A Massive Habitat Recently Discovered Is Now Under Threat Of Development.

The submerged forests have always been off limits to fishermen, who understand its importance as habitat for shrimps, sponges, anemones, and nursery fry. In a storm tide the tubes lie horizontally creating a barrier that protects crabs and small fish from being swept out to sea and the constantly waving fronds offer shelter from larger predator fish.

The fishermen knew it all along, but the academics have only discovered it because a developer was assessing the likely impact of the proposed Bathside Bay container port.

Scientific language in this case seems to have failed the sabella worm and the multifarious species supported by its ecosystem. The Government Inspector at the Planning Inquiry seemed unable to accept evidence that was not fully documented on paper. Fishermen are creatures of few words and they are certainly not scribes. It seems the elitism of scientific and legal language is harming our environment by not, in practice, lending the protection environmental legislators, in theory, intended.

License to Dredge

A shadow slides over the estuary,
a hard wind disturbing its waters;
unsettles resident waders.

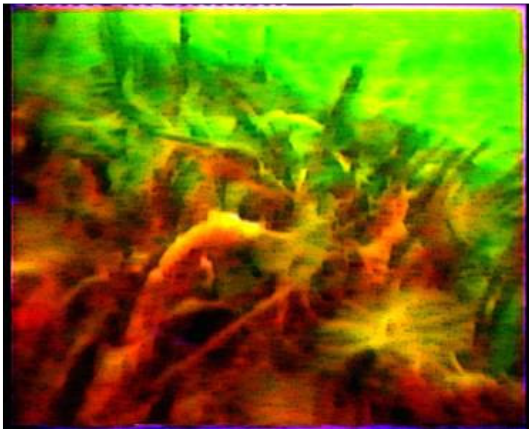
Storm clouds gather round idle gantries,
A golden light edges the rooftiles
on the hillslopes across the river.

Our train rattles round the bay, slicing the
hushed air as day waits for the squall to break.

Beneath the river's surface sabella beds
sway spaghetti tubes; a forest haven
for sponges, shrimps, and nursery fry.

Pens scratch paper,
under the far-shore gantries;
signatures sealing their fate.

A shadow slides over the estuary,
a hard wind disturbing its waters...



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Further information about the Stour and Orwell estuary sabella beds can be found [here](#)