thanet
district council

Seaweed

Introduction

We remove seaweed from bathing beaches between July and September every year.

We leave seaweed on the coast at all beaches and bays from October until March to provide the foraging ground for the internationally important winter visiting birds, such as the Turnstone.

This is a legal requirement of the Special Protection Area (SPA) for these wintering birds.

It is also a Blue Flag requirement to leave seaweed on the beach, unless it becomes a hazard.

We have explored different ways to collect the seaweed from the coast over the years. There are restrictions on seaweed collection due to the protected sites and the nature of the seaweed.

For example, we are not allowed to collect seaweed from areas where chalk reefs extend up to the promenade, as these chalk reefs are protected as Special Areas of Conservation (these beaches are also not designated bathing beaches*).

There are certain beaches, such as Kingsgate Bay, that cannot be accessed by the machinery that we use to collect seaweed. However, we use plant machinery and a contractor to collect the seaweed where we can.

Seaweed itself does not negatively impact water quality. Contaminants such as litter and dog poo can become caught in seaweed, impacting water quality, as they remain in shallow water for longer than they normally would on their own.

Prolonged spells of hot weather can make the smell of seaweed worse, because decomposition (which is the natural process that breaks down organic material) happens more quickly in warmer temperatures.

*Designated bathing beaches include – Botany Bay, Stone Bay, Viking Bay, Joss Bay, Fulsam Rock, Margate (The Bay), Minnis Bay, Ramsgate Sands, Western Undercliffe, St. Mildreds Bay, Walpole Bay, West Bay and Westbrook Bay.

What we do with the seaweed

Our seaweed is taken to a local farm, as part of an arrangement with the Environment Agency. Here, the seaweed is used as a natural fertiliser.

To be used as a fertilizer the seaweed must be:

- Free of litter
- Contain as little sand as possible
- Be drained of seawater

For this reason it is necessary to leave the seaweed in a pile on a slipway or on the beach for a short time to drain before it is collected.

The current Environment Agency licence allows 1,100 tonnes of seaweed to be spread at the farm per year.

Typically, we collect between 400 - 800 tonnes in a summer season. Seaweed levels tend to be cyclical, and sometimes we can go several years without any issues, whilst other years there may be more seaweed than we can collect.

There is a certain level of unpredictability with when and how the seaweed will be stranded on the beaches, so our response is reactive.

Harvesting/collecting seaweed for personal/commercial use

We allow people to take small quantities of seaweed for their own garden or allotment over the summer months (from April until September).

Some bays are more suitable for this activity than others. We would recommend Walpole Bay, West Bay (west side), Westgate Bay and Minnis Bay.

If you are removing seaweed from our beaches as part of a commercial activity – for example, if you are making a seaweed-based product to sell, or foraging seaweed as part of an organised activity – you will need our approval, as well as permission from Natural England.

If this is the case, please email beaches-and-coast@thanet.gov.uk with a description of your proposed sustainable activity.

There is also a Seaweed harvesting code of conduct: Thanet Coast's Seaweed Harvesting Code of Conduct https://www.thanetcoast.org.uk/thanet-coastal-codes/seaweed-harvesting-code/.

Clearance operations

Typically, we use a contractor to collect seaweed, beginning at any time from April, starting with the beaches with the most seaweed at that time.

Seaweed is collected between the restricted times of 5:00am and 10:00am, unless directed by the responsible council officer, to avoid using plant machinery when the beaches are busy.

We decide which beaches to collect seaweed from based on:

- How much seaweed is on the beach at that time (because collecting less than one full lorry-load of seaweed is inefficient)
- How many people use that beach for bathing

Procedure for when the odour becomes extreme

If we receive local reports that the smell is impacting people's health for more than a week or more, we will ask Kent Fire & Rescue Service to monitor the levels of hydrogen sulphide in the area. Based on their readings, they will conclude if there is any potential risk to public health.

This is mainly a potential issue where residential properties overlook beaches and bays that are not normally cleared of seaweed. In these extreme situations, we may look to use different methods of clearance, with the permission of agencies such as Natural England.

Methods of clearing hard to reach areas are very costly, and are not always possible due to access issues. Often, the sea can wash the seaweed away as easily as it deposits it, and much of the seaweed will be taken out with higher tides.

When seaweed decomposes, it releases a gas called Hydrogen sulphide.

- Hydrogen sulphide (H2S) is a colourless gas that smells like rotten eggs. Hydrogen sulphide is denser than air, so it can ‘sit’ in certain areas when there is no wind. Hydrogen sulphide occurs naturally in some environments such as sulphur springs, swamps and salt marshes, and is often associated with the decomposition of organic material.
- Smelling hydrogen sulphide does not mean that it will harm your health - the level at which it can be smelt is well below the level that causes health effects.
- Prolonged exposure can cause real symptoms such as headache, fatigue and nausea. Although these are not direct health effects, they are undesirable.
- Real human impacts from hydrogen sulphide are not likely until air levels reach at least 2 ppm for 30 minutes. At this point sensitive groups such as some asthmatics may respond with some minor irritations.
- People are normally exposed to hydrogen sulphide in air by breathing it in or by skin/eye contact.

- Any absorbed hydrogen sulphide does not accumulate in the body as it is rapidly metabolised in the liver and excreted in urine.
- Hydrogen sulphide usually breaks down in air in about three days and is dispersed by wind. Therefore exposure is only likely to continue if there is an ongoing source.

You can reduce your exposure by:

- avoiding areas that are known sources of hydrogen sulphide.
- keeping windows closed when the odour outdoors is noticeable and opening doors and windows once the outdoor odour has subsided.
- not exercising outdoors when the smell is present.

Did you know...

...between 50-80% of the world's oxygen is produced by seaweed, kelp, plankton and other algae?

...Thanet's Coast has the second longest unbroken stretch of Chalk Reef in the UK? (The longest is in Norfolk)

...some of Thanet's chalk caves are home to unique species of algae? Our coast is also home to rare stalked jellyfish, such as the St. John's Jellyfish!

...the Thanet Marine Conservation Zone covers over 6,000 hectares, with subtidal chalk running all the way around Thanet, from Ramsgate to Herne Bay?