

SEA GRANT
Telephone: (251) 438-5690
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By
Rick Wallace, Extension Marine Specialist
Auburn University Marine Extension and Research Center

A recent article in the Press Register highlighted the world-wide loss of submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) and provided estimates of losses in the Mobile Bay-Mississippi Sound area. As the article pointed out, numerous studies have shown that SAVs provide shelter and feeding opportunities for a wide variety of fish and shellfish.

The importance of the SAV, or seagrass, is often illustrated by comparing abundance of fish and shellfish found in SAV compared to unvegetated areas. Some years ago, researchers at the Auburn University Marine Extension and Research Center undertook a study in Mobile Bay to quantify shrimp abundance on unvegetated bottom, in SAV, and at marsh edges where emergent vegetation (marsh grass) grows.

Because the SAV and the marsh grass provide such good protection, it is difficult to get an accurate sample using conventional netting techniques. Researchers used a large, heavy cylinder which could be dropped into vegetation. Everything inside the cylinder was then collected using pumps and nets.

The results were clear from a sampling site near the mouth of East Fowl River. Eight times more brown shrimp, six times more pink shrimp, and twice as many white shrimp were found in SAV than in adjacent bare areas. Overall, there were six times as many shrimp in seagrass than on bare bottom.

Another interesting aspect of the study was a comparison between SAV and adjacent marsh grass. The importance of marsh grass habitat for sea life is also well

established but not many studies have compared marsh grass to SAV. At this site, shrimp were twice as abundant in the SAV as in the marsh grass.

In reality, all three habitats (bare bottom, SAV, and marsh grass) are important to shrimp. But clearly, more shrimp are found in vegetated areas and, at this site, more shrimp were found in SAVs than in marsh grass. Unfortunately, SAV is just not as visible as marsh grass and destruction and disappearance often goes unnoticed.