

29 Sublittoral sands and gravels

This covers both inshore and offshore sands and gravels found below the lower tidal limit. It includes a wide range of biotopes from mainly sand, through more even mixtures to mostly gravel.

Status

These are the most common subtidal habitats in the UK and they form the substrate down most of this region's coast, with sand around Bridlington, gravelly sand along most of the rest of the coast and sandy gravel off Whitby and from Flamborough Head running south a few kilometres offshore. Off the mouth of the Humber the sea bed is largely sand and gravel and mobile sand deposits cover extensive areas in the Humber Estuary (see Mudflats). Here coarse sand supports a low salinity tolerant fauna of polychaete worms, isopods, crabs and whelks, particularly opportunistic and mobile species, whilst medium and fine sand holds amphipods and polychaetes¹. Gravel beds are spawning grounds for herring *Clupea harengus*. In this region sublittoral sands and gravels are mostly formed from rock, rather than shells.

Threats

Dredging to clear shipping lanes or collect aggregate removes both the substrate and the life living on it. Fishing gear can cause physical disturbance, which can have a greater effect than aggregate extraction because repeated trawling can prevent recovery on the sea bed. Disturbance is also caused by pipe and cable laying, developments such as marinas and sea defences. High levels of bivalve exploitation may affect the balance of species and cause community change. Pollution by persistent chemicals that accumulate in species have led to declines in common whelks in the North Sea and cause the breakdown of DNA in some marine species. This includes many antifouling chemicals such as tributyl tin, and heavy metals. Oil and chemical leaks and shipping accidents can cause local pollution.

Map 32: Seabed sediments within 12 miles of the coast, showing the distribution of sublittoral sands and gravels

