



## MEDIA RELEASE

### Seagrass Monitoring Begins at Casuarina Coastal Reserve

NT Government Marine Biodiversity scientists and Larrakia National Aboriginal Corporation sea rangers will go to Casuarina Coastal Reserve today to map and monitor seagrass habitat.

Department of Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts (NRETA) marine scientist Dr Neil Smit said today's trip to Casuarina Coastal Reserve would coincide with the low tide to better facilitate the mapping of seagrass habitat.

"Casuarina Coastal Reserve is our only known seagrass habitat in Darwin Harbour and is a key habitat for feeding dugongs, yet no seagrass studies have previously been conducted in Darwin Harbour," Dr Smit said.

"One purpose of mapping seagrass habitat is to help us identify the present status of seagrass habitats and to determine if there are any changes in seagrass distribution or quality, as a response to increased changes in the Darwin Harbour catchment.

"Seagrasses are highly vulnerable to human impacts, such as pollution and also, climate change.

"An outcome we are aiming to achieve from this project is to establish an early warning mechanism for seagrass meadows in the high use areas and recommend appropriate action if they appear to be degrading."

Dr Smit said seagrasses play a vital role in supporting coastal marine communities and in maintaining diverse flora and fauna.

"Seagrasses are generally seen as an important component of coastal fisheries productivity, which includes being nursery grounds for many commercially important species," Dr Smit said.

"They play an important role in maintaining coastal water quality and clarity and seagrass meadows are also critical for the survival of dugong, an endangered species, which solely use seagrasses as their food source.

"Seagrass health is directly linked with dugong population numbers and health, and is often used as indicator of the overall ecosystem health."

Dr Smit said the seagrass mapping project had local and international significance.

"The project will develop seagrass monitoring techniques that can be easily used by local interest groups and communities who are keen to play a role in marine monitoring and conservation," Dr Smit said.

"Once the techniques have been successfully trialled for local NT environmental conditions, the community-based seagrass monitoring will form part of a NT Seagrass Watch program, which the NRETA Marine Biodiversity Group plans to roll out across the Top End.

“The NT program will form a key node within the International Seagrass Watch program, which has its headquarters at the Queensland Department of Primary Industries in Cairns.

“Approximately 165 sites are monitored as part of the program .with participants from Micronesia, Palau, Japan, Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Fiji.

“The NT node will fill a critical knowledge gap in the Seagrass Watch program by collecting data for seagrasses in tropical turbid waters, which until now, has been non-existent.”

Today’s seagrass mapping is expected to begin at 1.45pm at Casuarina Coastal Reserve.

Ends

**Media Note – For more information contact Neil Smit on 8920 9271**

Issued: 12pm Wednesday, 8 November 2006