

Mussel beds fear as killer sea squirt found in Devon estuary

An invasive creature known as the carpet sea squirt which smothers native marine life has been identified in Westcountry waters.

Fishery organisations fear that unless the spread of the Japanese marine invertebrate is stopped it will devalue the region's mussels and clog up fishing equipment.

The Devon Sea Fisheries Committee says the carpet sea squirt has been found in the Dart Estuary at Kingswear Marina and experts are now surveying the south coast for its presence.

A spokesman said: "The carpet sea squirt is fast growing and can blanket native species such as mussels and in the worst case will smother beds. It has a very short-lived larval stage which means its dispersal tends to be local, but like all non-native species it can spread in other ways."

A spokesman for the Great Britain Non-native Species Secretariat (NNSS) said: "The carpet sea squirt was only confirmed in British waters in 2008. However, there are strong concerns that it will quickly colonise a much wider area as it has been found to do in other countries such as New Zealand and the USA.

"Along with other problems, based on current predictions this species could cost mussel farming between £1.3 million and £6.8million over the next ten years."

The sea squirts – *didemnum vexillum* – are spongy textured with a leathery feel and have a mustard or pale orange/yellow colour. They appear as pale flat patches or wax dripping from artificial structures below the water.

The sea squirts foul fish spawning grounds and underwater structures such as pontoons, boat hulls, mooring lines, and aquaculture cages.

It also produces chemicals that deter many other species and, although it predominantly settles on artificial substrates, there are concerns that natural reefs may be vulnerable to colonisation.

Schemes involving stopping the clean flow of water from reaching the sea squirts, so they suffocate and die, have been trialled.

Another unwelcome visitor to the Westcountry's waters is the Canadian lobster, which have been caught by a number of fisherman in Devon. The lobsters can carry the bacterial disease Gaffkaemia, which can wipe out native stocks.

A meeting will be held in the New Year between Defra, the Fish Health Inspectorate and the Devon Sea Fisheries Committee to address the issue.

Plymouth Herald Express, Dec. 31, 2010