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Marine life flourishes in a “pile of junk”

Old tyres, steel cables, bricks and timber dumped in the harbour might seem an odd subject for a marine study, but the waters around Chowder Bay have Sydney University scientists fascinated.

Sponges, sea squirts, barnacles, kelp and other brown algae are thriving amongst debris beneath the wharf at Chowder Bay, and various types of fish are feeding and sheltering there.

Deputy Director of Sydney University’s Centre for Research on Ecological Impacts of Coastal Cities, Dr Gee Chapman, believes a combination of factors has created a very unique habitat.

“The use of Chowder Bay for more than 100 years by the military and its isolation from the public has largely protected the marine life,” Dr Chapman said.

“Over the years, a range of material has been dumped on an otherwise flat, sandy seafloor, creating habitat for a healthy and diverse range of marine life.

“Many of the types of animals and plants we are finding at Chowder Bay are similar to those associated with natural rocky reefs and boulder fields elsewhere in the harbour.”

Over the coming months Dr Chapman and her team will be undertaking a study to see if this debris can be successfully replaced with more natural hard habitat, such as sandstone boulders, while maintaining the same diversity of marine plants and animals.

The Harbour Trust manages the historic Defence site at Chowder Bay and is currently preparing a plan for how the former Army Maritime School and Submarine Miners Depot will be used in the future.

Executive Director of the Harbour Trust, Mr Geoff Bailey, said he hoped to be able to use the information gained in this study to help in ongoing management of the site.

“This collaboration between scientists from Sydney University and the Harbour Trust will help us to make informed decisions about use of the area.

“While we are keen to ensure maximum public access to the previously hidden away site, we are also committed to protecting the natural environment and ensuring it is well managed.

“Through the Chowder Bay marine study and other investigations we are involved in, the Harbour Trust is finding out about the environments in and around its sites and the best ways to conserve and enhance these for the future.”

At this stage, debris has been replaced by natural boulders in two areas under the wharf at Chowder Bay.

The Sydney University scientists will be comparing the types and abundance of animals and plants colonising and surviving on the new boulders to those on the remaining debris.

If replacing the debris with more natural habitat does not impact on the marine diversity then the study area may be extended.

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