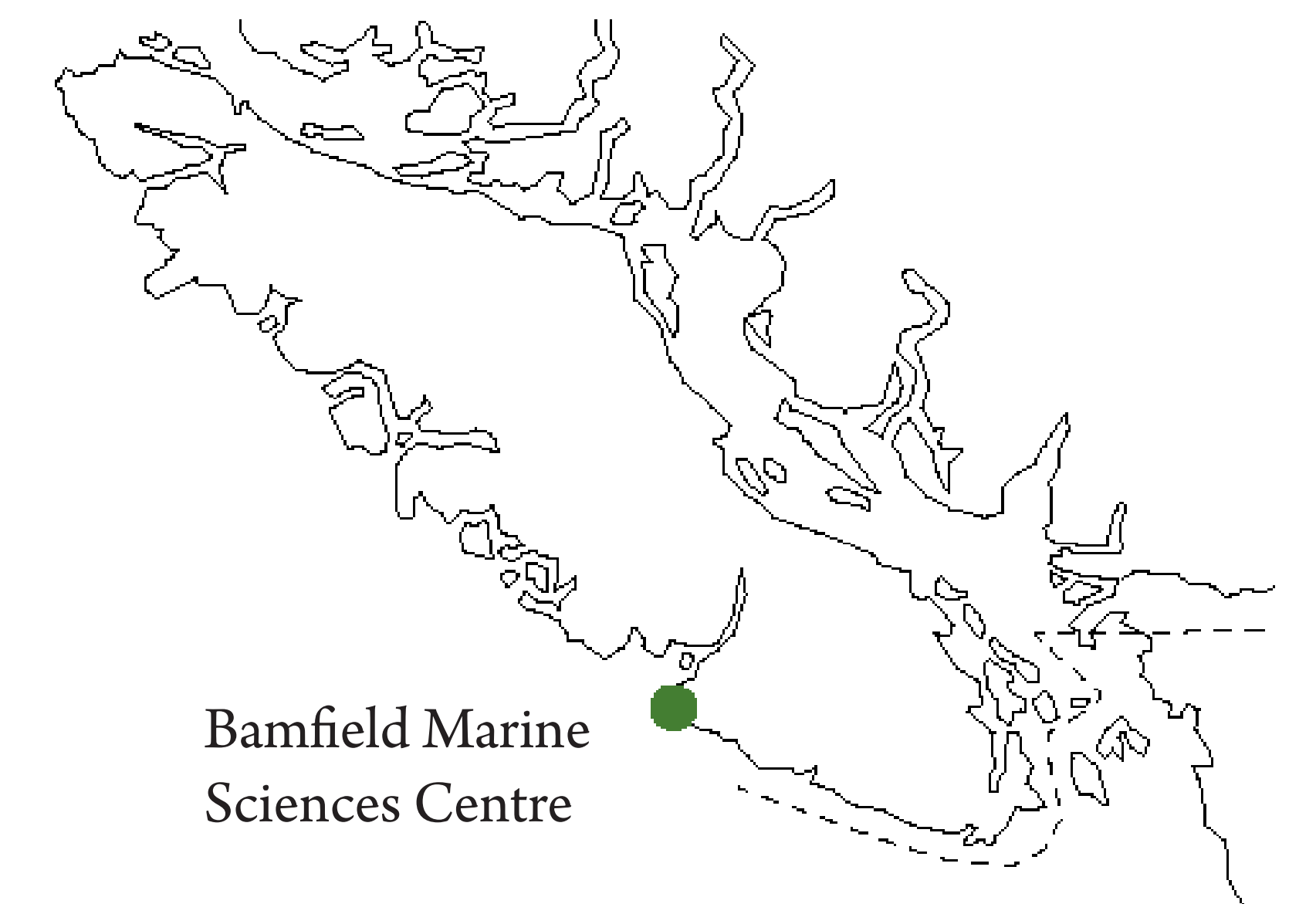


What factors influence the types and number of marine invertebrates found in a seagrass community?



Seagrasses are deceptive. They are not grass, which they resemble. Nor are they algae, with whom they share their ocean habitat. Instead, they are flowering plants, related to ones that live on land or on top of the water.

Seagrasses also conceal a hidden community of animals that live directly on their underwater leaves. These organisms are called *epifauna*, and understanding them has been the endeavour of Ross Whippo.

Ross visited several seagrass habitats near Bamfield Marine Sciences Centre on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Using scuba equipment, he collected samples of seagrass and brought them back to the lab to find out what else had come along.

The epifauna are small marine invertebrates that eat the algae growing on the seagrass. These include marine snails and sea slugs, along with various types of crustaceans, such as isopods and amphipods.

The types and number of epifauna Ross found in one seagrass habitat were not the same as what he found in another location. The same location sampled at different times of year also had a different makeup of organisms living in it. Many factors could be influencing what epifauna lives in the seagrass, including the temperature and salinity of the water, the density of seagrass, and the presence of other types of organisms. So far, no clear pattern has emerged. Figuring out this puzzle will be Ross' continuing challenge.



a. After measuring and recording conditions in a seagrass bed (a) the epifauna living within it can be collected. These may include sea slugs (b), crustaceans like isopods (c) and amphipods (d), or the jellyfish-relatives staurozoans (e).

all photographs by Ross Whippo