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## FROM SEA TO SOUL

Slither into it, swallow it or slap it on: seaweed is an almost supernatural substance with an astonishing array of uses. By Adriaane Pielou

**N**o one who has emerged from the sea to find their mosquito bites soothed or scratches healed will be too surprised to learn that the new star in high-end skincare is seaweed. Admittedly, seaweed isn't the first ingredient you might look for when hunting for a new moisturiser or solution to a skin problem,

especially if you only consciously encounter it when it wraps around your ankles as you're paddling. But seaweed is possessed of mind-boggling power and versatility. Absorbing all the nourishing properties of seawater, and with a velvety rich feel, it is packed with the vitamins, minerals, fats, trace elements and amino acids that healthy skin >



Scottish maker Ishga's organic-seaweed Invigorating Body Oil, [ishga.com](http://ishga.com)

needs – and in ten to 20 times the concentration any land plant contains. Seaweed's laundry list of proven benefits only begins with these: improve circulation, detoxify the system, promote collagen production, clear up acne, reduce rosacea, heal and tone the skin, help with weight loss, work as a sunscreen, reduce sun damage, lighten age spots, and moisturise so extravagantly well it can leave even men's shins feeling like silk.

The miraculous marine multitasker has been ubiquitous in Asia for millennia, and the Second World War gave it a boost in the West, when shortages of food thickener saw food processors discover the wonders of seaweed-derived carrageenan. Since then, seaweed – a catch-all term for marine plants from minuscule algae to great, swaying underwater forests of kelp, and which exists in at least 10,000 different types – has steadily been moving centre-stage.

And beyond the realm of health and beauty, seaweed is ubiquitous in the food, cosmetics and homecare industries and as a fertiliser. Helping to give frozen yogurts their luscious consistency, lipstick glide on, and furniture spray adhere, seaweed has also recently been successfully trialled as a biofuel, wood-substitute for house-building, biodegradable packaging, effective antibiotic, and repair material for damaged heart tissue.

Natural, sustainable and abundantly available, seaweed grows at twice the speed of any land plant. Kelp, for example, can grow by 60 centimetres a day. Farming – on ropes – requires zero use of any fertiliser or herbicide. Globally, unharvested seaweed is brilliant at absorbing and storing CO<sub>2</sub>. No wonder scientists have hailed seaweed as our last great natural resource.

### Skincare Salvation

In 2002, on Canada's Pacific Northwest coast, Diane Bernard launched the world's

first certified organic, food-grade skincare based on fresh, raw seaweed. Shocked to discover a well-known European brand contained only traces of the seaweed it trumpeted, along with numerous additives, she started Seafloa with the mantra, "If it's not good enough to eat, it's not good enough to put on your skin." Made in small batches by hand, and shipped worldwide, Seafloa's masks and moisturisers contain at least 50 per cent – and usually almost 80 per cent – seaweed.

Given the many spas in Brittany have been devoted to thalassotherapy since the 1960s, the longest-established European providers of seaweed-based skincare are French. Take Phytomer, Spa Technologies and Thalga, the latter of which supplies 20,000 spas in 90 countries. But many newer arrivals are Irish or Scottish artisan companies. The certified organic Irish brand Voya, for instance, with its irresistible new Angelicus Serratus Nourishing Body Oil. Or Rí Na Mara, launched by a former nurse who discovered seaweed's potency while working in a dermatology unit. And then there is the marvellous Maiiro, helmed by seaweed evangelist founder Katy Rowe. Scotland's Ishga and The Hebridean Seaweed Company both wild-harvest from the pristine waters around the Hebrides. In England, the ever-inventive >





Right: Voya's Angelicus Serratus Nourishing Body Oil, [voya.ie](http://voya.ie); below: Douceur Marine Soothing Moisturizing Cream by French marque Phytomer, [phytomer.fr](http://phytomer.fr)

Margate-based Haeckels sells grown-to-order Bio Restore Membranes, skin-softening under-eye patches. The Swedish brand La Bruket has products so fresh you can almost feel seaspray bouncing off your skin. And US makers include Naturopathica and Pursoma, whose beautifully packaged wild-harvested products now include Purbebe items for children, such as Pixie Dust.

### Full Immersion

The Atlantic west coast of Ireland is swept by the purest marine waters in Europe, providing perfect growing conditions for a host of seaweeds. Guests at the Slieve Donard resort in Northern Ireland who want to sample a traditional Irish seaweed bathhouse – all glazed-tile interiors with deep claw-foot baths brimming with seaweed – get directed to the nearby Soak in County Down. Voya now runs the old seaweed bathhouse in Strandhill, County Sligo. Stride out onto the Irish shore where Wild Atlantic Seaweed Baths have set up deep wood barrels in the open air and you can gaze out across the ocean – head cold, body warm – as fronds undulate around you. For those who would rather sink into seaweed at home, you can order it fresh or dried from enterprising outfits such as Mungo Murphy's Seaweed Co or The Irish Seaweed Company. Espa, Pursoma, Voya and Ishga, among others, all sell powdered seaweed for less messy baths at home.

### Pure Indulgence

Possibly the most beautiful spa where you can sink into a seaweed bath or have a seaweed wrap or facial is in the Maldives, at the Four Seasons' Kuda Huraa resort, which uses California's Osea products. You cross by boat to the tiny island spa, where moonlit sessions are a special treat. In France, the 2,730km Brittany coast is dotted with thalasso spas, such as the Sofitel Quiberon complex, a favourite for weight loss. Seaweed-specialist day spas in less-expected locations include the new Thalgo spa in Cannes and Blythswood Square in Glasgow, which uses Ishga products.

### To Good Health

Japanese and Korean women have traditionally used kelp creams or supplements to keep their hair lustrous, and JS Health's Hair & Energy supplements have won a huge fan base for just this reason. Thalion's new Super Energie supplements work as a detoxifier, as does Haeckels' 60%H<sub>2</sub>O Ocean Cleanse Concentrate.

Is there no end to seaweed's versatility? So far, the answer seems a resolute no. Recent research at the Kyushu University in Japan on one seaweed extract, fucoidan, showed it stimulated certain enzymes that can kill cancer cells. Good for our skin, the planet and our health? Now that's something to think about as you lie in a bath of velvety fronds. –

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Left: a custom seaweed treatment by Voya; below: La Bruket's Restorative Algae Hand Peel, [labruket.com](http://labruket.com)

