



Northern Ireland Annual Report 2018



Seasearch NI divers ready to dive in Strangford Lough with DV Diving (September, 2018)



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Introduction

The aim of Seasearch is to gather information on seabed habitats and associated marine wildlife in Britain and Ireland through the participation of volunteer recreational divers. The scheme is coordinated by the Marine Conservation Society (MCS) and organized regionally by a number of coordinators. As well as recording marine life and habitats, volunteers record litter or any other man-made impacts that are observed.

The objectives of Seasearch are:

- ▶ To encourage the participation of volunteer recreational divers in marine conservation through gathering data, particularly for areas where little data exists or where there is a conservation need.
- ▶ To provide training in recording skills to enable volunteer recreational divers to participate in Seasearch.
- ▶ To make quality assured Seasearch data available to partner organizations and general public.
- ▶ To raise public awareness of the diversity of marine life and habitats in Britain and Ireland through the dissemination of information gathered and the identification of issues arising from it.

Through training and organised dives, Seasearch recreational scuba divers are able to survey large areas of the seabed for which species and habitats information may not be otherwise available.

All Seasearch Northern Ireland data is held by the local environmental records centre, CEDaR (www.nmni.com/cedar), while all Seasearch data from around the UK and Ireland is available to view and download on the NBN Atlas (www.nbnatlas.org).

2018 Summary

As well as being our 30 Year Anniversary, 2018 will also be remembered for the long summer of unparalleled hot, sunny and calm weather, allowing for fantastic underwater visibility and diving. The good conditions (and a little help from David Attenborough!) helped to promote our cause, encouraging new divers to get involved and resulting in fully booked dive boats and training courses.

This year we received funding from the Sea Deep and Living Seas projects, both supported by Ulster Wildlife. This covered 50% of costs for 6* boat dive days, targeting shark, skate and ray habitats to inform Sea Deep, as well as under-recorded sites and priority habitats to support Living Seas.

In summary, we ran:

- ▶ 10 boat dives
- ▶ 2 shore dives
- ▶ 2 observer courses
- ▶ Marine life ID course

We were also able to promote Seasearch at BSAC Ireland and Sea Deep events and ended 2018 with >70 forms submitted by local Seasearchers and welcomed 2 new certified observers to the group.

Of particular note has been the growth in camera use by divers and the incredible photographs and videos being captured and shared as a result. Not only do these facilitate species identification but they also play an important role in highlighting the rich marine biodiversity that surrounds Northern Ireland. While Blue Planet II had a momentous impact on public consciousness in regards to the global plastic problem, the images and footage from Seasearch divers helped to remind us of the importance of protecting our local marine environment.

We now look forward to the beginning of the next 30 years of Seasearch, with new participants, sites, skills and plenty of diving!

*One Living Seas funded boat dive was postponed due to weather and is rescheduled for 2019



exploring the undersea world

2018 Calendar

Date	Event	Location	Price per person
Saturday 24th March	Observer Course	Ulster Wildlife HQ, Belfast	£30
Saturday 24th March	Evening Shore Dive	Brompton	Free
Wednesday 11th April	Sea Deep Project evening talk	Ballyholme Yacht Club	Free
Sunday 20th May	2 Boat Dives with DV Diving	Killough	£35
Saturday 2nd June	2 Boat Dives with Aquaholics	Portrush	£35
Saturday 30th June	2 Boat Dives with Aquaholics	Ballycastle	£35
Saturday 4th August	2 Boat Dives with Aquaholics	Cushendun	£35
Sunday 2nd September	2 Boat Dives with DV Diving	Strangford Lough	£35
Saturday 6th October	2 Boat Dives with Louth Adventures	Carlingford Lough	£35

*Additional shore dives to be arranged

For more information or to book a place please contact us at seasearchni@gmail.co.uk or via Facebook: 'Seasearch NI'.



Training

OBSERVER COURSES

24th March & 15th September, Ulster Wildlife

9 participants partook in an observer course run by coordinators Sally and Charmaine in March. The classroom session was followed by a shore dive at Brompton, enabling trainees to put their new found skills to the test and fill out their first form. Due to high demand, a second course was run in September, for a further 8 participants. 2 participants from these courses have since completed their training booklets and are now certified observers.



Participants during Observer Course in March

MARINE LIFE ID COURSE

10th November, Crawfordsburn

We ended the season with an underwater marine life course led by marine biologist, diver and underwater photographer Bernard Picton. Bernard provided a day of tutoring covering basic marine taxonomy and species identification (with a particular focus on local species and sites). Feedback from the course participants was great and we look forward to running further courses in 2019.



Marine Life ID course, November Bernard Picton

Events

BSAC IRELAND

5th April, Blackstaff House

In April we were invited to present at the BSAC Ireland Regional Evening Event in Belfast, providing a great opportunity to promote Seasearch to a large group of divers and dive club representatives from all over Ireland.



Coordinator Sally Stewart-Moore Promoting Seasearch NI at BSAC Ireland Regional Evening

SEA DEEP

11th April, Ballyholme Yacht Club

As our key funders in 2018, Sea Deep ran an evening talk for divers at Ballyholme Yacht Club, which gave both Seasearch and non-Seasearch divers the opportunity to find out more about the project, our local species of sharks, skates and rays, the importance of protecting them and how divers can play a role.

Diving & Recording

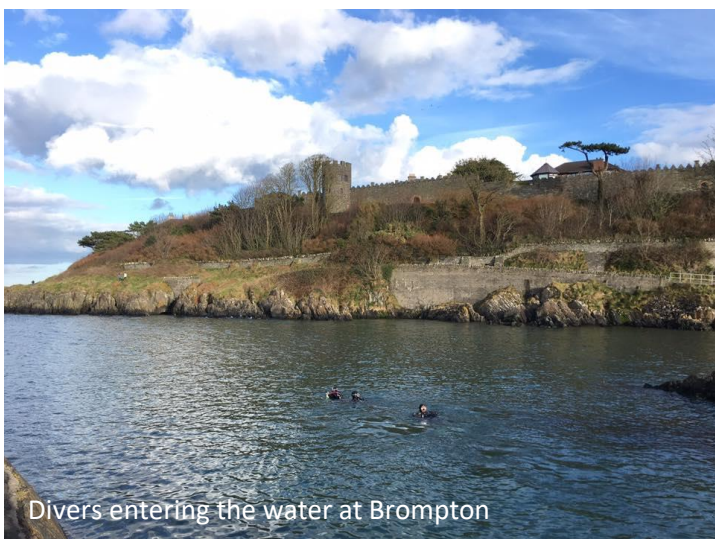
BELFAST LOUGH

Brompton 24th March

Brompton 15th September

2 shore dives were organised off Brompton (Bangor) in March and September following the observer courses. This is a popular site for local Seasearch divers, providing easy access, shelter, diverse flora and fauna and a variety of habitats.

In September, we linked up with the UK Big Beach Clean weekend and asked divers to collect any litter they came across in Brompton. This generated some interest from the local beach cleaning group and we featured in the County Down Spectator.



Divers entering the water at Brompton



<http://www.handdrawncreative.co.uk>



Divers down!

NINE divers from Seasearch Northern Ireland were involved in an underwater clean up at Smelt Mill Bay, Bangor.

Underwater litter collected included aluminium beer cans, bottles, fishing line and lures, a trolley wheel, a golf ball, and a pair of shorts.

While the divers were in the water, Charmaine and Sally from Seasearch Northern Ireland collected a large bin bag of litter on the shore. This included a lot of plastic items such as cotton buds, cigarette butts, broken glass, two pairs of boxer shorts and a significant amount of fishing line and lures.

Seasearch is a UK and Ireland organisation, funded primarily by the Marine Conservation Society, and locally by Ulster Wildlife.

North Coast 2nd June, Portstewart, Aquaholics

Two boat dive days with Aquaholics, part funded by Sea Deep, were run out of Portstewart and Ballycastle in June.

11 divers joined us from Portstewart for 2 dives targeting shark, skate and ray habitat. Plenty of dogfish and rays were recorded, as well as masked crab, bobtail squid and squid eggs, attached to the sandy/gravelly sediment. During the surface interval those on board were treated to a sighting of a minke whale.



30th June, Ballycastle, Aquaholics

A 2nd boat dive day in June set out from Ballycastle with 12 divers on board, once again treated to perfect conditions. Again targeting elasmobranch habitat, the group entered the water off Carrick-a-rede in the morning, followed by Kinbane Head in the afternoon. A species rich, rocky habitat was observed at both sites, including an abundance of dogfish and of particular interest, a crawfish.



EAST ANTRIM COAST

4th August, Cushendall, Aquaholics

Again part-funded by Sea Deep, in August we set out from Cushendall on the East Antrim Coast with 9 divers on board. Yet again, we were blessed with sunshine and calm conditions. We targeted the maerl beds off Garron Point in the morning, last explored by Seasearch in 2014. We were unable to find the dense beds that were observed in 2014, but perhaps due to a strong drift. Patches of maerl was recorded on the flat, gravelly bottom, but not the dense beds that had been described previously. The site had a rich diversity of seaweeds, starfish and fish species. Dogfish were once again abundant and the eggcases that were spotted highlighted this as an important breeding site.

A number of nudibranch species were recorded from the Dalriada Seagrass beds during the 2nd dive. The seagrass bed itself was in good condition, with a number of juvenile fish species (flat fish in particular) recorded, as well as a variety of sea snails on the *Zostera* fronds.

We were pleased to be joined by Ben McAteer from Queens University for the day who is completing a PhD on local marine citizen science initiatives.



Seasearch divers off Cushendall



Dogfish eggcases ©Phil Wilkinson



Polycera quadrilineata ©Phil Wilkinson



Exploring the Dalriada seagrass bed ©Phil Wilkinson

STRANGFORD LOUGH

2nd September, Strangford Lough, DV Diving

Despite a break in the good weather, we were able to relocate our Living Seas boat day to Strangford Lough, diving off Skate Rock and amongst the seagrass beds off Castleward. We still had great visibility underwater with plenty to see amongst the seagrass and living on the sandy bottom including *Nephrops* and anemones.



CARLINGFORD LOUGH

6th October, Carlingford Lough, Louth Adventures

Our final boat day of the year was with Louth Adventures in Carlingford Lough, funded again by Living Seas. This linked up with the Marine BioBlitz of Carlingford Lough being carried out by CEDaR, enabling Seasearchers to contribute to the 256 marine species recorded over the course of the weekend. On the rocky, boulder seabed at the first site, Buoy no. 9, divers recorded a number of fish species, including the tompot blenny and an abundance of butterfish that were paired up and displaying apparent mating behaviors.

The second dive site, off the shore at Greenore (and next to the ferry terminal), doesn't look exciting from the surface, but turned out to be a great dive. Divers recorded more fish species including pogue, flounder and blennies, along with a diversity of anemones and echinoderms, including the swimming feather stars.



Featherstar *Antedon bifida* ©Phil Wilkinson



Butterfish *Pholis gunnellus* mating ©Phil Wilkinson



Hot soup and form filling!

Litter reporting

The underwater litter pick at Brompton in September generated a lot of interest that highlighted opportunities for Seasearch to play a role in tackling the marine litter problem, both through recording, and collecting, litter. Litter data collected by Seasearch around the Island of Ireland over the years was collated at CEDaR and a report was produced. While the data is qualitative, it is useful for identifying more heavily impacted areas as well as the main sources of marine litter. We plan to run more litter focused dives and encourage divers to record the litter they see underwater.

Read the full report here: <https://www.nmni.com/resource-library/pdf/CEDaR/Seasearch-Marine-Litter-Records-2018.pdf>

More publicity!

In August, long running Seasearcher, underwater photographer and beach cleaner, Phil Wilkinson featured in the Marine Conservation Society magazine. Another great opportunity to promote Seasearch locally, as well as highlighting Phil's commitment and contribution to the project.



Acknowledgements

There are a number of individuals and organisations who make a vital contribution to maintaining Seasearch in Northern Ireland. Thanks go to Rebecca Hunter (Sea Deep project officer) and Dave Wall (Living Seas project officer) for funding 10 boat dive days in 2018, and to Ulster Wildlife in general for supporting the project and providing training facilities. Thanks to BSAC Ireland for the opportunity to promote Seasearch at the regional event. Thanks to Bernard Picton for running the marine life ID course. Thanks to Aquaholics, DV Diving and Louth Adventures for supplying boat charter and sharing local knowledge.

Finally, thanks to all the volunteers who participated in 2018. You have made a vital contribution to recording marine life around Northern Ireland and your enthusiasm, commitment, records and photos are central to its protection.



Seasearch divers with Aquaholics off Portstewart, June 2018