

Seasearch West of Scotland

# 2020 Report

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taobh Siar na h-Alba



sireach na mara

[www.seasearch.org.uk](http://www.seasearch.org.uk)



A fine native oyster recorded by seasearchers Katherine Knight and Eric Holden during the brief summer period between lockdowns



Apart from a brief period during the Summer most Scottish dive kit and Seasearch survey equipment sat gathering dust during 2020

## The Year of Covid 19

The 2020 season was unlike any other since Seasearch first began over 30 years ago. At the start of the year hopes were high that the impressive achievements of 2018 and 2019 would perhaps be exceeded with a planned target of 250 forms and three training courses for the year. Things started fairly well with plans laid for expeditions to Wester Ross, Skye and Loch Fyne and courses organised for Edinburgh, Glasgow and Eyemouth. The Eyemouth course was a Surveyor course, the first run in Scotland for several years and it actually went ahead with 10 participants completing the two day course. After that though, Covid began to bite and both expeditions and courses began to be cancelled. One of the first casualties was a planned course in Glasgow followed by a days practical survey training in Loch Fyne. Initial hopes that the pandemic would quickly be brought under control were dashed and the difficult decision was made





Some of the oysters found during shore surveys



Evidence of breeding oysters found during shore surveys at the West Loch



Eubranchus tricolor were strikingly obvious during one of the few dives which took place in Loch Fyne over the summer



Painted gobies in their breeding colours were also frequent in Loch Fyne.

in April to cancel all face to face Seasearch activities for the foreseeable future. As a consequence the summer of

2020 saw no organised Seasearch diving or courses and at one stage it looked like the year would be a complete washout. However the West of Scotland maintained a low incidence of Covid and gradually local volunteers began diving in small socially distanced groups obeying the guidelines issued by the various diving organisations. Forms began to trickle in and by the end of the year 129 forms had been submitted, of which 30% were Surveyor and 70% Observer. These forms represented around 258 volunteer days, an impressive total given the constraints all the volunteers were operating under.

Just like the organised survey expeditions, training courses were also cancelled. An exception was the Surveyor course run in March based at Eyemouth. This was the first Surveyor course run in Scotland for several years and allowed the west coast tutor, Owen Paisley, to become qualified as a Surveyor tutor. This should make it easier to run future Surveyor courses in Scotland. By late Summer it became obvious that face to face teaching wasn't going to resume any time soon. Responding to requests for an online course the first online Observer course was run in July followed by another two in October and November. By the end of 2020, 59 people had completed Seasearch training, almost double the number who had attended training in 2019. Paradoxically, with the addition of these three online courses 2020 turned out to be one of the most successful years ever for Seasearch courses in Scotland.

## The Seasearch Year

### January

As usual, January was a period of planning and tidying up loose ends from the previous year. The final 2019 forms were received and 214 forms sent for processing. The first forms were received for 2020 and plans were laid for courses at Eyemouth, South Skye and Ullapool. Surveys were also planned to look for Northern Sea fans with GUE and to continue survey work around the Summer Isles. The Seasearch co-ordinators annual meeting in London also took place.

### February

An article was produced for Scottish Diver and another couple of Observer courses added to the list, one in Argyll and another at Eyemouth. A further 5 forms trickled in as did qualifying forms for the first person to qualify as an Observer in 2020.

### March

The only face to face course in Scotland during 2020 was run in Eyemouth. West of Scotland co-ordinator Owen Paisley assisted the UK co-ordinator Charlotte Bolton in running a Surveyor course. This was the first Surveyor course held in Scotland for several years and ten people attended.

A welcome addition to the Seasearch team was Karen Boswarva who took on responsibility for social media and started with

revitalising the Seasearch Argyll facebook page which had been suffering from neglect.

Assistance was also provided to the Seasearch data officer, Angus Jackson to correct anomalous 2019 dive positions and protocols put in place to try and reduce the number of “dry dives” recorded each year.

## April

A month of completing outstanding reports and resolving queries from 2019. The social media profile continued to be enhanced by Karen and advice was given to some members of Bingham sub aqua club writing an article for Scuba magazine. A number of planned expeditions and courses were cancelled and time was spent getting to grips with the intricacies of Zoom.

## May

With the growing realisation that diving was unlikely to start up again any day soon the opportunity was taken to complete outstanding reports on previous diving expeditions. The first of these was completed at the end of May detailing the findings of the Bingham BSAC club during their expeditions to Carna in Loch Sunart in 2018. Some enterprising individuals also started carrying out shore surveys recording interesting finds such as native oysters using standard Observer recording forms.

## June

Zoom meetings were held to discuss ways of delivering courses during COVID as well as discussions about a possible collaboration between Seasearch and Heriot Watt university on an Oyster Ark project. The proposal was that Seasearch would identify surviving populations of native oysters. Heriot Watt would then visit hot spots and collect oysters for a captive breeding and release project.

At this stage it was still hoped that courses and diving would resume with plans for courses in Ullapool and Tayvallich and a diving expedition to the Summer Isles.

## July

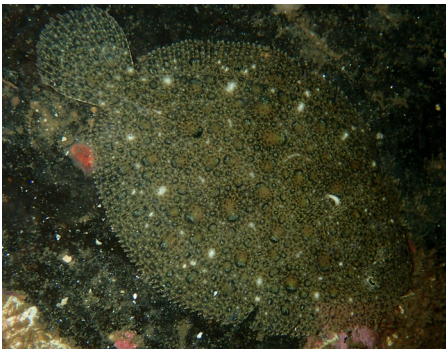
Bowing to the inevitable a first trial online Observer course was held. Initially the plan was to run the trial with 4-5 participants but exposure on social media led to a surge of enquiries and it was eventually run with 15 people. The format decided on was 6 evening sessions, each an hour long, with a Q&A session at the end of each session. Karen Boswarva assisted with the course as part of the process of becoming a tutor.

Later on in the month an online talk was arranged with newly recruited Scottish co-ordinator Paul Kay taking about fish ID. This attracted 23 people, mainly from Scotland but with a scattering from further afield.

A few people were still diving in their local areas including a small team of GUE divers who reported 7 fireworks anemones



A report on the 2018 diving expedition to Carna was completed and put on the Seasearch web site



A juvenile Brill in Loch Etive was one of the more unusual sightings in 2020 (S.Benjamins)



An unusual record of a dogfish infested with what appear to be leeches (Possibly *Pisicola geometra*) was photographed by seasearch divers Jo Beaton and Catriona Hoon during a dive in Loch Etive

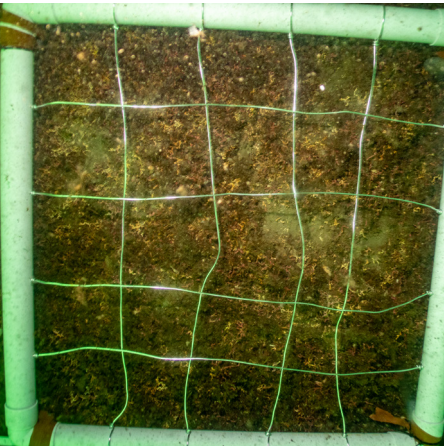




A rare 2021 survey dive took place in Loch Sween where the divers were astonished by the abundance of life



This unusual colour variety of the Sunstar *Crossaster Papposus* was recorded in Loch Sween.



Throughout the year contact was maintained with various community groups and discussions held on how best to analyse data-especially the maerl transect photographs collected during 2019

along a 48m transect at a depth of 52m.

## August

Several participants in the July online course carried out independent socially distant dives and filled in qualifying forms. Considerable time was devoted to providing feedback on the forms with the gratifying result that three qualified as Observers by the end of the month.

News of the online course seemed to spread and enquiries were received from the University of St Andrews dive club and Aquatron dive school for further courses.

Forms total for the year crept up to 43.

## September

Plans for another online course were refined with a date set in October. Forms continued to trickle in from areas such as Loch Creran and Loch Fyne with the total reaching 59 by the months end. Zoom meeting with a representative from Melfort Estate were held to discuss a future diving survey and assistance was given to a University of Glasgow student in planning a diving survey.

## October

A second online Observer course was run over 6 evenings with 19 participants. The newly appointed Scottish co-ordinators Paul Kay and Iain Dixon assisted on the course.

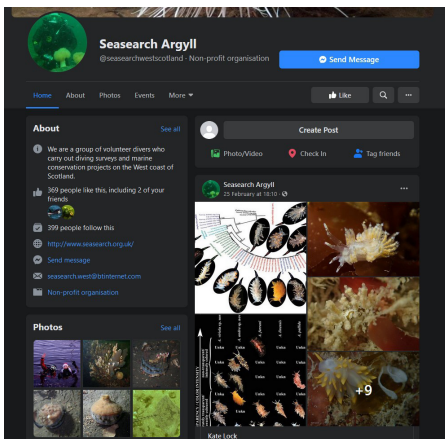
A zoom meeting was also held with two Skye bases Seasearchers and advice given on the setting up of Fireworks Anemone monitoring project in Loch Duich.

News was received that the Oyster Ark project hadn't received funding but the groundwork laid in discussing the project was expected to come in useful for future bids.

Forms total crept up to 75







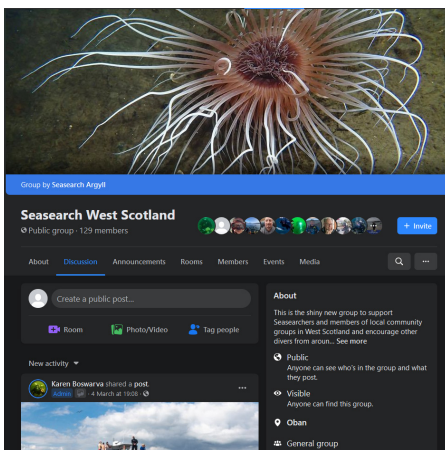
The Seasearch Argyll page which was regularly updated throughout 2020 resulting in a steady stream of new “Likes”

## November

A third and final 2020 online course was held attracting 15 participants. Once again this attracted people from all over the UK. About half came from Scotland but the others came from as far afield as North Wales, London and Plymouth.

## December

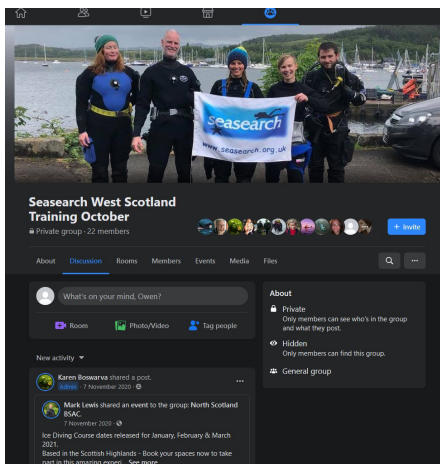
As well as dealing with post course support queries the opportunity was taken in December to analyse the maerl photographic transects collected from Wester Ross in 2019. This revealed some interesting differences between the four maerl beds surveyed as well as providing an opportunity to standardise the data analysis.



The new West Scotland Group was launched in June and allowed for much more interaction than the Argyll page

## Seasearch West Scotland Social Media

During 2020 the Seasearch West Scotland social media presence was greatly improved and expanded by Karen Boswarva. The original Seasearch Argyll page was updated and links improved with the Seasearch Scotland pages. In addition a new Facebook group Seasearch West Scotland was set up. The Seasearch West Scotland “group” was launched to take over from the Seasearch Argyll “page” as it offers more features and the ability to moderate the audience, it is a private platform that users ask to join. Whereas Seasearch Argyll is a page that anyone can like and follow.



A facebook training group was set up for each Observer course in the Autumn allowing more interaction between the otherwise isolated participants and tutors.

Growth increased steadily from the launch on the 1st June 2020 and by the end of 2020 there were 116 members. Engagement was high with 105 out of 116 members actively participating. Content has varied from sharing interesting posts, to quizzes, and features with an aim of providing interesting Seasearch related content and boosting engagement and interest. The new group has a series of albums separated into Phyla that aims to be populated with member images (with their permission) as a way of helping identify both common and rarer species.

The Seasearch Argyll page has also continued to grow with followers increasing by +100% in 1 year, as have the page likes

Facebook was also used as an online platform for sharing training materials during Seasearch Observer courses. Groups were set up for each of the three courses run in 2020. This was shown to be a useful way of encouraging interaction between participants as well a successful way of getting groups to interact both with the course tutors and each other.

After each course the participants were asked to fill in a feedback form and some of the comments are set out below. In general the feedback was complimentary, if contradictory at times, with the evening format and the use of facebook being the main causes of contention.

*I believe the online course (October 2020) was run very well. I liked the way it was split into several sessions, with each session being an hour long (if, for example, there had been a 5-hour online session, it would have been hard to focus and take much from the course). The materials provided were all very useful throughout the course, and I am sure they will be helpful once I start recording information from dives too.*

*I thought this was very well organised and thought the information that we received on the social platform was a good resource.*

*The dive video and discussion about Identification and form filling was really useful*

*The online course was good though I would have been better over one day. However I am really grateful that you were able to do this course online-it has opened my eyes to things I was missing underwater. Now I will be looking closer at everything.*

*I found it hard to keep an overview of stuff uploaded on the facebook group; the group is great for sharing photos or asking questions, but would rather see links and documents sent out in an email or otherwise.*

*Nice course, good tutors*

*I liked the evening sessions but feel that the structure might suit longer sessions*

*Huge thanks to you both! Looking forward to giving it a go.*

## Acknowledgements

A huge thank you to the 36 volunteer divers who gave freely of their time during difficult circumstances in 2020. They were: Alena Rogozhkina, Ariel Northaway, Caitlin Lamb, Carolyn Wilson, Catriona Hoon, Chris Rickard, Colin Harris, Debra Lilley, Eric Holden, Frank Melvin, Genine Keogh, Helene Corrieu, Jean-Luc Solandt, Jo Beaton, Jo Topalion, Karen Boswarva, Kate Lock, Katherine Knight, Lauren Donachie, Lewis Press, Marcus Rose, Mark Philp, Owen Flowers, Owen Paisley, Paul Chandler, Rob Spray, Richard West, Robbie Neilson, Ruth McAlister, Sands Castro, Steven Benjamin, Sue Ash, Vanessa Charles, Wendy Northaway, Yasmin Roubi, Zadjil Sachet

**Seasearch in Scotland gratefully  
acknowledge the financial support provided  
by NatureScot in 2020.**



Seasearch is a volunteer underwater survey project run by MCS which encourages recreational divers to contribute towards the conservation of the marine environment.

