



2020 Annual Report



Thornback ray *Raja clavata* ©Libby Keatley

About Seasearch

The aim of Seasearch N.I. is to gather information on seabed habitats and associated marine wildlife in Britain and Ireland through the participation of volunteer recreational divers and snorkellers. 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 and other anthropogenic impacts. The objectives of Seasearch N.I. are:

- To encourage the participation of volunteer recreational divers and snorkellers 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 and snorkellers to participate in Seasearch.
- To make quality assured Seasearch data available to partner organizations and the general public.
- To raise public awareness of the diversity of local marine life and habitats 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) and is made available to view and download on the NBN Atlas Northern Ireland (<https://northernireland.nbnatlas.org/>).

2020 Summary

In January 2020 our calendar for the year ahead was looking busy with 5 boat dive days, a sea squirt safari, observer course, surveyor course and plenty of shore dives to look forward to, but unfortunately COVID 19 got in the way and all Seasearch organised diving had to be cancelled.

A lot of time and effort goes into planning a Seasearch annual programme, from securing funding to checking tide times to finding dates that suit boat charters/tutors (etc.!), and so, as coordinator, having to cancel is disappointing to say the least. But worst of all, is missing the craic with the Seasearch group and of course facing a year without gathering vital data from our marine environment..

It soon became clear that my concerns were completely misplaced as the N.I. Seasearchers stepped up to the mark, teaming up to make 2020 one of the best years yet! Thanks to the establishment of local WhatsApp groups for organising informal shore dives and snorkels (when COVID restrictions allowed), our Seasearchers were regularly out exploring the seabed, taking photos and submitting forms and in the end, we received our highest number of forms for years! We also made the most of everyone's new best friend, Zoom, to carry out two Observer Courses online, with a great turnout for each. Finally we were able to feed into the new DiveNI website and embrace the powers of social media to share stunning underwater images and encounters with a wider audience. Promoting our local marine environment in this way is vital for driving conservation efforts and is arguably the most important function of Seasearch.

In summary:

We ran:

- 2 Online Observer Courses

We trained:

- 30 Seasearch Observers

We certified

- 6 Seasearch Observers

We received:

- 100 forms!

A huge thanks goes to our funders for 2020; Ulster Wildlife's Sea Deep and Living Seas projects, and Sea Changers, for accommodating the change in plans, as well as MCS for their continued support and boat charters Aquaholics and D.V. Diving for their patience and understanding. We look forward to working with you all on our rescheduled dives and events in 2021.

Finally, thanks to the NI Seasearchers for their enthusiasm and commitment to the cause throughout this tumultuous and testing year, for which I hope that Seasearch has provided some form of escape.

Sally Stewart-Moore

Seasearch Northern Ireland Coordinator



Photo credit Claire Goodwin

2020 Programme

Date	Event	Location	Cost
25 th – 26 th April	Surveyor Course	Carlingford Lough	£80
16 th May	Observer Course	Belfast	£30
17 th May	Boat dives with DV Diving	Killough	£35
19 th – 21 st June	Sea Squirt Safari	Portrush	£70
4 th July	Seagrass Shore Dive / Snorkel	Glenarm	Free
19 th July	Boat Dives with Aquaholics	Portballintrae	£35
29 th July	Shore dive / Snorkel	Orlock Point	Free
9 th August	Boat Dives with DV Diving	Outer Ards Peninsula	£35
5 th September	Boat Dives with Aquaholics	The Maiden Islands	£35
19 th September	Shore dive / Snorkel	Portnahapple	Free
3 rd October	Boat Dives with Aquaholics	Ballygalley	£35
18 th October	Shore dive / Snorkel	Ballintoy Harbour	Free

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



The plan that was! Unfortunately, due to COVID 19, we were forced to cancel all of the above, with the exception of our Observer Course which was run online. Thankfully Seasearchers were still able to dive and snorkel under their own steam and we were able to reschedule all of our planned boat dives and surveys for 2021.

Training

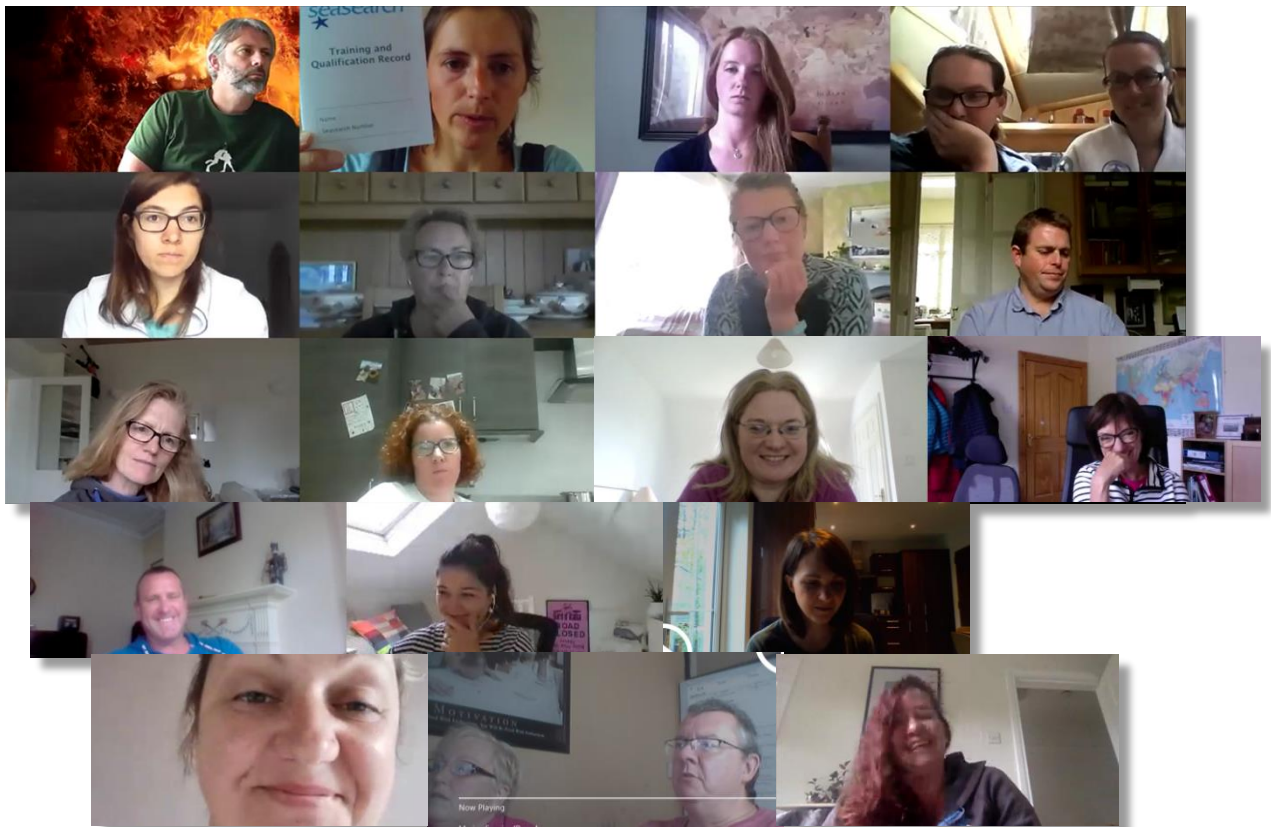
Online Observer Courses

27th – 28th June

This was run online for 18 new Seasearchers, with a couple of existing Observers taking part as a refresher. The course was run over 2 weekend mornings and 5 of the participants have since submitted their 5 forms and become certified Seasearch Observers! Congratulations and well done to Libby Keatley, Constance Schere, Ciaran Norrby, Aidan Gray and Philip Reid!

22nd – 23rd August

Due to high demand we ran a second Observer course in August, following the same format as before. We trained 12 new Seasearch Observers and again, a couple of certified Observers took part as a refresher. One from this course has already become certified as an Observer, congratulations and well done to Adriana Pacesa!



Diving and snorkelling

As we weren't able to go ahead with our official Seasearch programme for the year, we set up 4 WhatsApp groups for both Seasearch and non-Seasearch divers to link up and arrange their own shore dives independently. It was so encouraging to see photos and forms from many dives and snorkels being arranged in this way and it proved to be a great way for like-minded people to connect. A particular bonus for me was the long overdue establishment of a Seasearch Snorkellers group who enjoyed some lovely snorkel surveys and were able to gather important information for the shallower infralittoral zone.

Co Down Seasearchers (38 participants)

North Coast Seasearchers (22 participants)

East Antrim Seasearchers (15 participants)

Seasearch Snorkellers (22 participants)

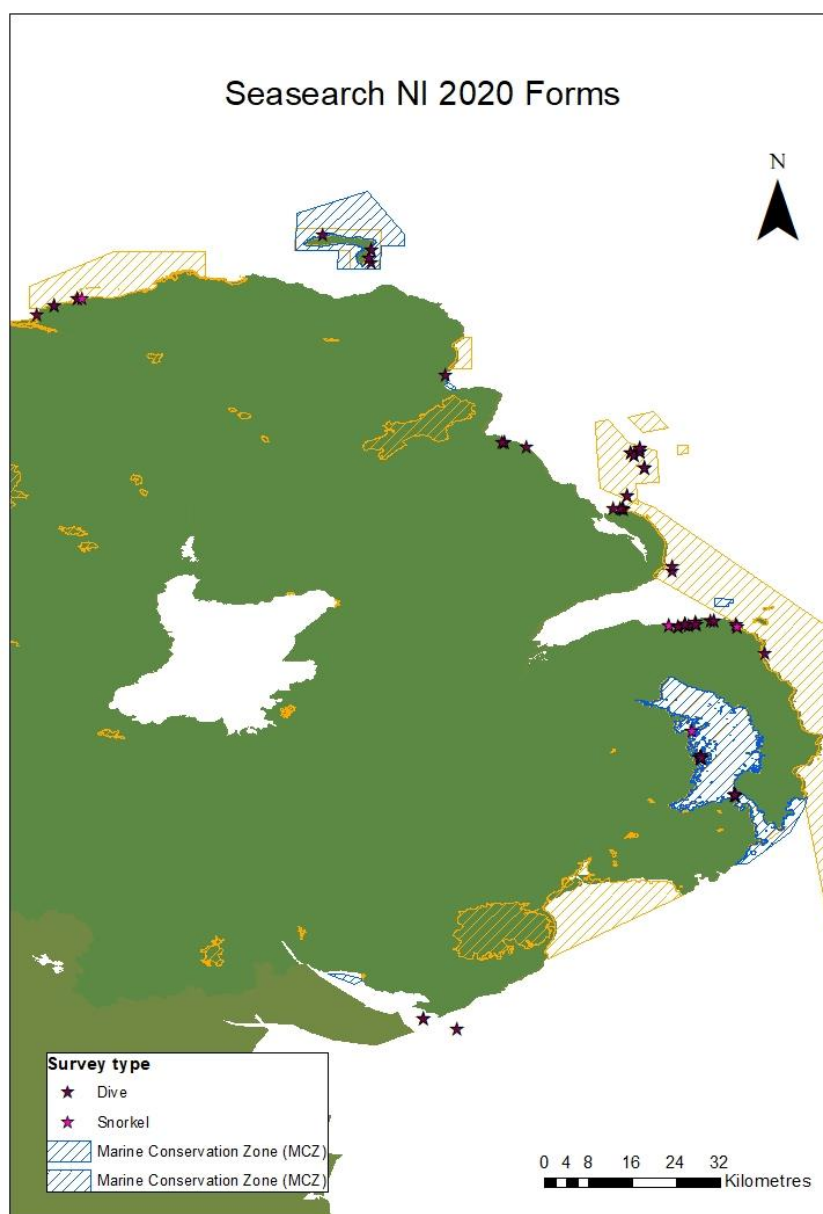


Recording

Forms

100 forms containing valuable site, habitat and species information were submitted by Seasearch NI divers and snorkellers in 2020, which is our highest number for some time. These were made up of 90 Observer forms, equating to 90% of overall forms, and 10 Surveyor forms (10%). 93 (93%) forms were submitted by divers, while 7 (7%) were submitted by snorkellers. Overall, nearly 90 hours spent underwater by Seasearchers was recorded in 2020, with a good coverage around the Northern Irish coast, both within and outside designated Marine Protected Areas. Sadly, some form of litter e.g. plastic, metal or glass, was recorded from 45% of sites surveyed.

Once again we awarded a prize to the Seasearcher who provided the most forms, which this year went to our new Observer, Libby Keatley who submitted a whopping 32 forms. A great effort. This was followed closely by Phil Wilkinson's 25 forms. However, more important than the number of forms is the quality of forms, which was exceptional this year from everybody. This is somewhat down to group learning, through sharing images and expertise via our WhatsApp groups and social media channels that helps with verifying records and improving ID skills.



Interesting records

As always, we had some particularly interesting records this year, some of which made it to local news!

Phil Wilkinson captured this image of the nudibranch *Hancockia uncinata* at [Luke's Point](#) (a brand new shore site for Seasearch this year). This was the first confirmed record for the Island of Ireland, with only 14 other records for this species in the UK, predominantly from the south west coast of England and west coast of Scotland.

The good weather and weeknight shore diving meant more records from night dives, and we received a handful of fabulous photos of John Dory *Zeus faber*, including this one from Noel Black. John Dory is typically a warmer water species and so these records are important indicators for climate change.

Another exciting photo, again from a night dive at Luke's Point, came from Johnny Hall who captured this lumpsucker *Cyclopterus lumpus*, most likely coming inshore to breed.

Finally, a highlight of the year was this inquisitive seal pup who delighted divers at the Inner Lees Wreck in Strangford Lough on a number of occasions and providing us with some newsworthy photos and videos, which also thrilled the general public and lead to various other news items on BelfastLive.



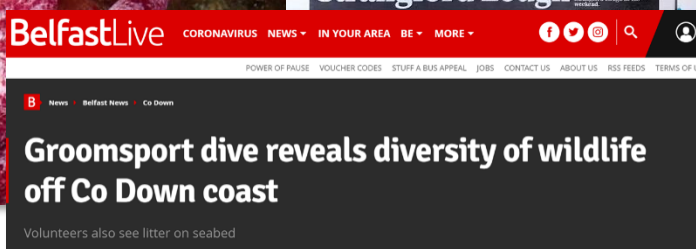
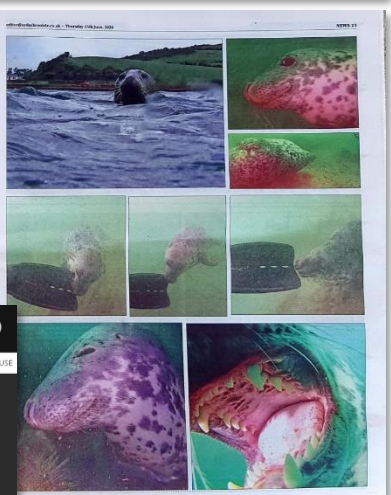
©Phil Wilkinson



©Noel Black



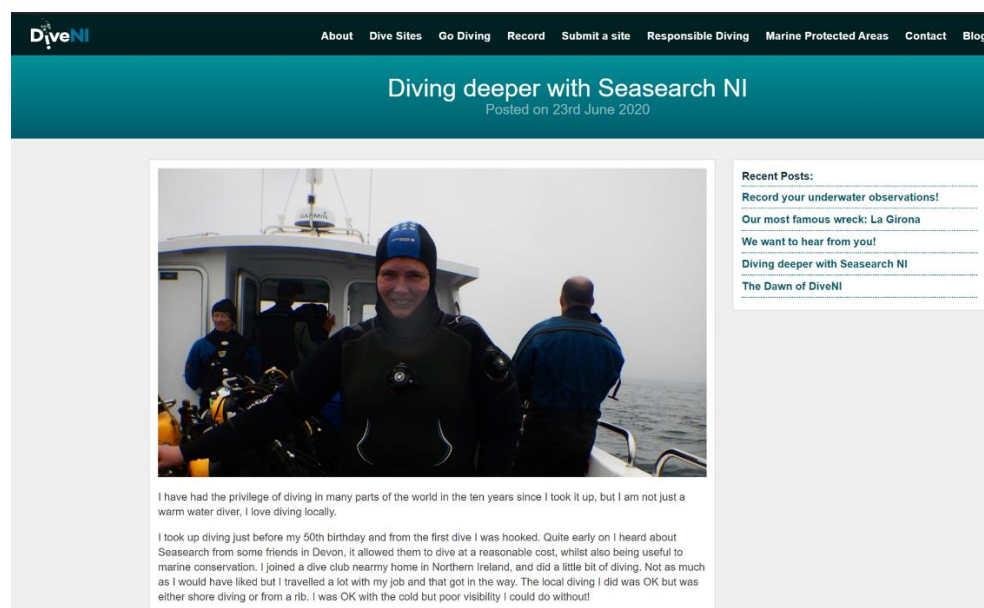
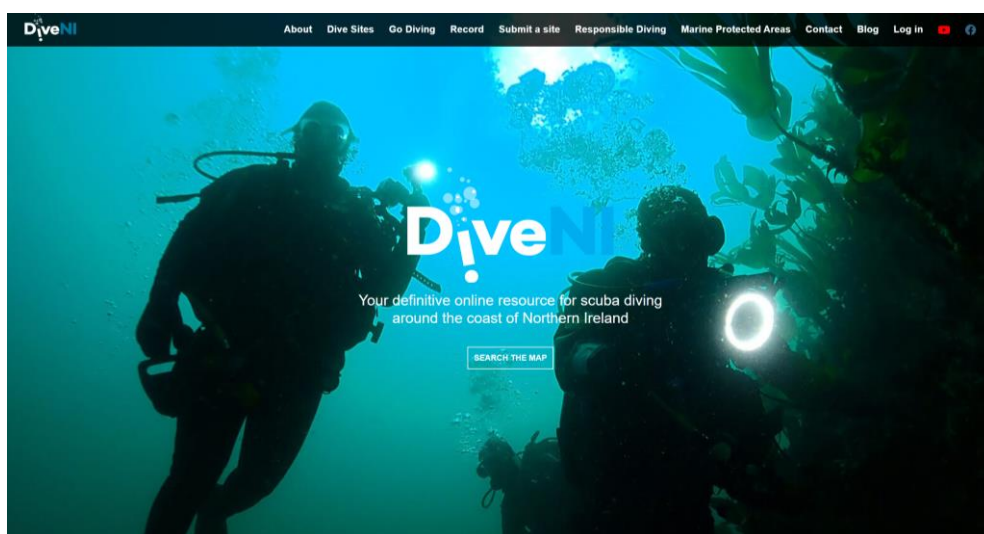
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Other activities

DiveNI

On 8th June (World Oceans Day) the new [DiveNI](#) website was launched. This website maps and provides information and imagery for dive sites, making it the definitive online resource for scuba diving and snorkelling around the coast of Northern Ireland. This new portal was launched by the Centre for Environmental Data and Recording (CEDaR) but the ethos behind the website is that it is built BY the diving community, FOR the diving community and Seasearch divers made a huge contribution to getting it up and running, and continue to provide valuable information and imagery that keeps the website current. This includes the addition of new sites such as [Luke's Point](#) and relaying useful information for other divers and snorkellers. DiveNI also includes all Seasearch species records for each individual dive site, as well as information for getting involved with Seasearch and a lovely blog item from our Seasearcher Debra Lilley!



I have had the privilege of diving in many parts of the world in the ten years since I took it up, but I am not just a warm water diver, I love diving locally.

I took up diving just before my 50th birthday and from the first dive I was hooked. Quite early on I heard about Seasearch from some friends in Devon, it allowed them to dive at a reasonable cost, whilst also being useful to marine conservation. I joined a dive club nearby home in Northern Ireland, and did a little bit of diving. Not as much as I would have liked but I travelled a lot with my job and that got in the way. The local diving I did was OK but was either shore diving or from a rib. I was OK with the cold but poor visibility I could do without!

Social media

We relied heavily on social media this year in order to stay connected with Seasearchers and continue to develop recording skills. In the depths of lock down, we ran a daily species ID quiz using photos kindly donated by Claire Goodwin and Bernard Picton. We ran a little competition as part of the quiz, which was won by Donna Conroy!

Following the quiz, which ran for 50 days and covered 50 species (!), we started a #SpeciesOfTheWeek campaign on Facebook with help from Ben McKibbin, a Marine Biology student from Queens University Belfast, which ran for 8 weeks. From October through to December the #SpeciesOfTheWeek was based on photos provided by Seasearch divers.

Acknowledgments

A huge thanks again to everyone who made 2020 happen and who contributed to what was a great year for us, despite the global pandemic. We look forward to keeping up this momentum in 2021 and continuing to provide information that goes towards protecting our special marine environment.

Forms were submitted by Aidan Gray, Chris Gill, Ciaran Norrby, Clara Alvarez-Alonso, Constance Schere, Corinna Woerdemann, Debra Lilley, Karen Patterson, Libby Keatley, Phil Wilkinson, Philip McAleenan, Philip Reid, Phoebe Morton, Richard Bloore, Ruth McAlister, Sally Nelson, Sally Stewart-Moore, Sophie Reid. THANKS TO YOU ALL.