



dive into conservation

Seasearch Northern Ireland

Report 2010



Introduction

Seasearch Northern Ireland had some changes in staff during 2009-2010 with Charmaine Beer becoming the local coordinator in late July 2010. Due to a gap in coordination prior to this there were fewer organised dives and training courses than in previous years. However despite this successful dives and an Observer course were completed by Seasearch volunteers in 2010 and records continued to be submitted thanks to our volunteers.

Diving Activities and Recording

There were a total of 46 recording forms submitted in total for 2010, 18 Observer and 29 Surveyor. There was a high proportion of very good quality Surveyor records, many from previously unrecorded sites which are of great value to the Seasearch programme.

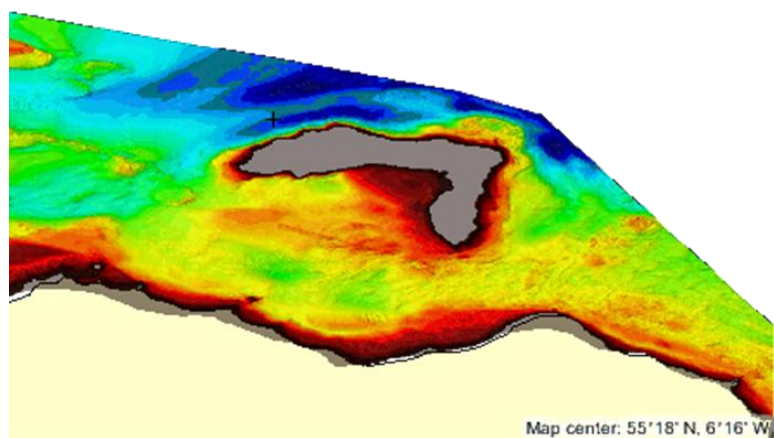
Dr Claire Goodwin organised a diving weekend which resulted in a number of records at both Observer and Surveyor level including some which will contribute towards qualifications for volunteers. The area under focus for the survey was Rathlin Island which is popular with sports divers and also of high conservation importance for Northern Ireland. Four sites were surveyed: Damicornis Bay, the east coast, Duncan's Bo on the north wall and Church Bay. On the Church Bay dive the Biodiversity Action Plan priority species *Arachnanthus sarsi* was spotted and photographed by Jean Kennedy in close proximity to the wreck of the Drake. Although this species is known to occur in the bay it has not been recorded from this area before – most records are from the White Cliffs area.



Image by Jean Kennedy of *Arachnanthus sarsi*.

This area will be retargeted for survey in September 2011 with a focus on anemone identification with Chris Wood, national coordinator for Seasearch and author of the Seasearch guide to Corals and Anemones.

An organised day of diving on the North Coast was completed in September 2010 and this resulted in a number of qualifying forms for Observer volunteers as well as some detailed Surveyor forms. We targeted unrecorded sites by the Giants Causeway and Bengore Head for the seabed mapping project - Joint Irish Bathymetric Survey Project (JIBS). The sites can be very difficult to dive due to tidal flow but we were able to complete the dives and get records for this site which required ground-truthing for multibeam survey work that had been completed (<http://www.marine.ie/home/services/surveys/seabed/JIBS.htm>). The data was used immediately by researchers on the project.



Preliminary seabed of the North Coast and Rathlin Island (JIBS project).



Divers returning to Ballycastle following dives at Bengore Head and the Giants Causeway.



Image of *Dendrodoa grossularia* from the Giants Causway (D. Greer).

Seasearch volunteers submitted records from their own dives from around the Northern Irish Coast and of particular interest were records from Carlingford Lough as there are limited records from this sea lough. Some of the sites surveyed had a high richness of marine life, particularly with sea squirts and sponges. This area has already been targeted in 2011, including a completely new site which we now have several records for. Some photographs from Deirdre Greer (Surveyor volunteer) are included below for Carlingford Lough and other sites.



Acanthodoris pilosa, Carlingford Lough (D. Greer).



Coryphella gracilis, Carlingford Lough (D. Greer).



Vidal Rock, Carlingford Lough (D. Greer).



Sponges from North Wall Rathlin (D. Greer).

Training Activities

An Observer Course was run at Portrush Coastal Zone Centre in September 2010 which was attended by seven new volunteers who are continuing to complete their qualification dives and recording forms. Most completed qualification dives on the north coast the following day. Daniel O'Neil is due to complete his surveyor qualification in early 2011.

Promotional activities

A promotional talk to Dolphins Sub-Aqua Club was delivered at the Annual General Meeting 2010. Charmaine Beer also promoted Seasearch at the dive show in Birmingham 2010. Contact has been made with a number of dive clubs and operators. The local website has been updated and the volunteer interest in Seasearch has increased as a result.

Seasearch Northern Ireland Programme for 2011

Due to an underspend in previous funding and permission to continue by NIEA, Seasearch NI can continue until March 2012. A funding application for the following period will be submitted to allow Seasearch NI to continue to operate and submit essential records for the protection of Northern Ireland's marine environment. A varied season of training and diving is already underway for 2011 which will focus on key geographical areas and increasing the number of records and volunteer activity.

Appendix 1 – Use of Seasearch data from the University of Ulster.

Application of Seasearch dive data: Skerries-Causeway Habitat Mapping.

Annika Clements.

89 Seasearch dives from 2006-2009 have recently been utilised in a Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) project based at the University of Ulster to map the seabed habitats surrounding the Skerries and adjacent to the Causeway Coast. Specifically the diver recorded site descriptions and species lists, which were entered into Marine Recorder, have been classified into Marine Nature Conservation Review (MNCR) biotopes, then translated into EUNIS habitats and used to identify Annex 1 habitats (EU Habitats Directive). This data, coupled with the dive locations, are presented in a GIS (Geographic Information System) to enable ground-truthing of multibeam sonar data spanning the area of interest. Together these datasets allow an interpretation of seafloor data to facilitate mapping of the main habitats in the region. The resulting map forms a significant part of a proposal to the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) for the area to become a Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

The Seasearch dives have been an incredibly valuable resource in a region where ground-truthing surveys designed for habitat mapping are not available, and the dives fill crucial gaps in the coverage of data.

Appendix 2 – Use of Seasearch data by the Ulster Museum and Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Application of Seasearch dive data: Skerries-Causeway report on proposed SAC.

Claire Goodwin, National Museums Northern Ireland.

The Skerries and Causeway area has recently been proposed as a SAC. A joint National Museums Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Environment Agency project surveyed the area (SSNI 2006-2010), providing baseline information for the designation. However, the limited survey time meant that the number of survey sites was restricted. Seasearch data enabled gaps in the professional dive surveys to be filled – for example Seasearch surveyed sites on the Tun's bank and the caves around the Carrick-a-Reede rope bridge which were not covered by the NIEA/National Museums team. In total 89 Seasearch dives from 2006-2009 have recently been utilised for the project.