The table to the right shows how many species in each phylum were found and what the most common species were. Listed below are records of particular interest.

**Sponges** Sponges were not abundant in the seagrass or maerl habitats due to a lack of suitable substrate.

**Bryozoans** Vesiculatia spinoasa was recorded from Red Bay. This is not known from many sites in Northern Ireland. *Anemones, Corals, Hydroids and Jellyfish*. The burrowing anemone *Cerianthus lloydii* was common in some areas of the seagrass bed.

**Crustaceans** A record was made of the spiny spider crab *Maja brachydactyla* from the seagrass bed. This is a southern species, one of the first NI records was from a Seasearch dive in 2006 and so far in Northern Ireland it has only been recorded near Portrush. It may be increasing in number due to climate change – the Red Bay record is the furthest north it has been recorded in the Irish Sea.

**Molluscs** The curled octopus *Eledone cirrhosa* was recorded from the maerl bed and the cuttlefish *Sepiola atlantica* from the seagrass bed. Juvenile queen and king scallops were common on the maerl bed, this habitat is an important nursery area for these species.

**Echinoderms** Beds of brittlestars (*Ophiocomina placenta* and *Ophiocomina nigra*) were recorded from the maerl bed. The seven armed starfish was seen on several dives – this species feeds on brittlestars. A gorsefoot starfish *Anseropoda placenta* was recorded from the maerl bed. This is a Northern Ireland Conservation Priority Species, extremely vulnerable to damage by fishing gear.

**Fish** A large, very well camouflaged, Brill *Scophthalmus rhombus* was recorded from the seagrass bed. This is just one of the fish species which may be found hiding in this habitat. Juvenile flatfish were also common – seagrass beds are an important nursery area.

**Seaweeds** several red weeds were found in association with the maerl bed including *Eledone cirrhosa* – sea orange seaweed (*Halichondria bowerbankii* (Site 1) which is a Northern Ireland Species of Conservation Concern and *Scinaea turgida* which has distinctive balloon-like leaves.

Thanks to Aquaholics, who were used for boat cover and supplied site information.

Seasearch is a volunteer underwater survey project for recreational divers to actively contribute to the conservation of the marine environment (see www.seasearch.org.uk for more information). Financial support for the project was given by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency.

This report was written by Claire Goodwin (thanks to Chris Wood for editorial comments). Photos are by Claire Goodwin and Dave Harrison.

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Seagrass in Waterfoot Bay.

This seagrass bed had only previously been surveyed on spot dives and its extent was not known. Eleven survey dives took place over five days. On several dives volunteers swam to try and reach the edge of the seagrass bed. The seagrass was quite patchy and sometimes it was difficult to determine if the bed had stopped completely. The north-west edge of the bed (55° 03.731'N, 006° 02.628'W) and the deepest extent of the bed (5m BCD) (55° 03.579'N, 006° 02.364'W) were located. However, the south-east edge and inshore could not be found despite divers swimming for over an hour. The furthest south-east divers reached was 55° 03.426'N, 006° 02.430'W and seagrass was still present at this site. This seagrass bed therefore measures over 650m in length by 250m width making it one of the biggest in Northern Ireland.

The substrate in the bay was fine sand. The *Zostera marina* seagrass formed large patches with areas of bare sand or mixed algae in between them (including *Porphyra*, *Hypoglossum hypoglossoides*, and sparse sugar kelp *Laminaria saccharina*). Cover of seagrass was dense in some places, up to 80%, but varied considerably across the bed. Juvenile flatfish were abundant and several other fish species including gurnard and brill were spotted. A spiny spider crab *Maja brachydactyla* was recorded. This species is a southern species and was first recorded in Northern Ireland in 2006 and formerly known only from the Skerries. This record is the most northerly in the Irish Sea and represents a considerable extension of this species' range.

Red Bay Maerl Bed

Maerl is a calcareous seaweed, with an appearance a bit like pink twiglets (the crisp). It can form large beds which are important nursery habitats for species such as scallops. Many Northern Ireland priority species, such as the sand star *Astropecten irregularis* are associated with maerl beds. We did some survey work on fossil maerl beds in Red Bay in 2006. In 2008/2009 we surveyed additional sites in Red Bay. Eleven survey dives took place over five days. The survey sites were situated offshore of Cushendun where maerl had been recorded by drop down video. Red Bay was recently (February 2010) selected as a European Special Area of Conservation because of its maerl habitat. As well as living maerl beds there are ‘mega ripples’ of fossil maerl present in deeper water. In these the dead maerl piles up to form waves over 1m high. We surveyed areas of live and fossil maerl. This data was used as evidence to help designate the SAC and will assist in its long term monitoring. Depths are given as Below Chart Datum (BCD).