

Northern Ireland Annual Report 2014

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Volunteer Seasearch divers at Ardglass Marina, Co. Down.

1. Introduction
2. Training Activities
 - 2.1. Marine Life Identification Course, Portaferry, 10th May 2014
 - 2.2. Observer Course, Belfast, 16th August 2014
 - 2.3. Seasearch Qualifications
 - 2.4. Sea Anemones and Corals of Britain and Ireland Course, Ballycastle, 13th and 14th September 2014
3. Diving Activities and Recording
 - 3.1. Glenarm and Isle of Muck, 6th July 2014
 - 3.2. Ardglass and Gullies, Co. Down, 9th August 2014
 - 3.3. Rathlin Island, 14th September 2014
 - 3.4. Independent records
4. Marine Conservation Zones
5. Seasearch Northern Ireland Programme for 2015
6. Acknowledgments



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1. 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 apparent.

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 organized dives, Seasearch recreational scuba divers are able to survey large areas of the seabed which would otherwise be inaccessible for monitoring authorities. All Seasearch Northern Ireland data is deposited at the regional recording centre, CeDAR, at the Ulster Museum (<http://www.nmni.com/cedar>). The data is also validated and available free through the NBN gateway <http://data.nbn.org.uk/>.



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2. Training Activities

2.1. Marine Life Identification Course, Portaferry, 10th May 2014

A Marine Life Identification Course was held in Exploris Aquarium (Portaferry) attended by 11 people.

Two Seasearch tutors, Claire Goodwin and Charmaine Beer, delivered the course creating great enthusiasm about the marine life and re-enforcing the importance of data recording to the participants.



It was a practical day of marine life identification skills. There were a series of 8 short lectures on all the major groups of our marine life, from starfish to sponges, combined with a trip through Exploris Aquarium to look for marine life. Participants were also able to try to identify different seaweeds in the marine lab. NIEA staff member Clara Alvarez Alonso came along to take part of this course and take the chance to improve her marine life identification skills.



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2.2. Observer Course, Belfast, 16th August 2014

An Observer course was organized in Belfast in August. The course was taught by Charmaine Beer (Seasearch tutor) and attended by six people. This is the training course for starting out with Seasearch recording and filling in Observation forms after the dives to document marine life and habitats.



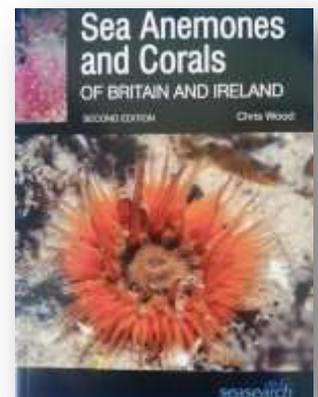
2.3. Seasearch Qualifications

One volunteer who attended the Seasearch Observer Course in Belfast, Matthew Ferguson, has completed the Qualification. Congratulations! Matthew intends to move up to the Surveyor level in 2015.

2.4. Sea Anemones and Corals of Britain and Ireland Course, Ballycastle, 13th and 14th September 2014

This course ran in September 2014 in the Aquaholics House in Ballycastle. The course was tutored by Chris Wood (Seasearch National Coordinator).

Participants enjoyed a trip to Port Ballintoy where we searched for anemones on the lower shore. This was followed by two dives in Rathlin Island (North Wall and Church Bay).



Volunteer Seasearch divers
completing forms



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3. Diving Activities and Recording

Recording forms have been received from a range of organized Seasearch dives in target areas and also from dives that volunteer divers have completed independently, a total of 30 for 2014. These comprise 21 Observation Forms and 9 Survey Forms.

3.1. Glenarm and Isle of Muck, 6th July 2014

Two sites were surveyed in collaboration with Ulster Wildlife Trust who subsidised two boat dives in these areas. The volunteers completed seven Seasearch Forms: one Observation and two Survey Forms at Glenarm North and two Observation and two Survey Forms at Muck Island.

The site at Glenarm North contained two habitats, Kelp forest/park in a depth of 11m below the sea level with algal and animal turf and a second habitat present around 12m bsl of sand and pebbles characterised by brittlestars *Ophiura ophiura*, eyelash worm *Myxicola infundibulum* and occasional sugar kelp *Saccharina latissima*.



North Muck Island seabed is characterised by terraces of bedrock (11-16 m below sea level) and some vertical walls (2-3 m high) rich in marine species with dominance of crevice sea cucumbers *Aslia lefevrei*, hornwrack *Flustra foliacea* and club sea squirts *Aplidium punctum* amongst others.

3.2. Ardglass and Gunns Island, Co. Down, 9th August 2014

Two sites were surveyed, Gunns Island and Golf Course Gully, by a mix of volunteers and an experienced Surveyor. They completed six Observation and two Survey Forms. The sites both comprised infralittoral surge gullies and are an unusual geomorphological feature in Northern Ireland. Notable records were of the nationally scarce southern cup-coral *Caryophyllia inornata* (Golf Course Gully), and of dabberlocks *Alaria esculenta* (Gunns

Island), amongst *Laminaria hyperborea* kelp forest. Both sites have a high variety of animals dominated by gooseberry sea squirts *Dendrodoa grossularia* (Golf Course gully) and dead men's fingers *Alcyonium digitatum* (Gunns Island).



Aldglass Gullies and Gunns Island sites surveyed 2013-4

3.3 Rathlin Island, 14th September 2014

Two sites were surveyed as a part of the Sea Anemones and Corals of Britain and Ireland weekend Course with Chris Wood; The North Wall and Church Bay. The volunteers completed six Observation and three Survey Forms. Exceptionally high records of sponges and cnidarians were recorded due to the skill level of recorders present on survey dives.

The North Wall is dominated by anthozoans and sponges. At the top of the Wall there is Kelp forest on rock, then Kelp park until 20 m below sea level with abundant Devonshire cup corals *Caryophyllia smithii*, common square-ended hornwrack *Securiflustra securifrons* and a variety of sponges. (image right).



Below 20 m bsl there is a vertical and overhanging rock wall with gullies and fissures, characterised by Devonshire cup corals *Caryophyllia smithii* and white striped anemones *Actinothoe sphyrodeta*.

Of particular note at this site was the presence of at least one luxuriant patch of the little recorded pink sea finger *Alcyonium hibernicum* (image right).



The site opposite White Cliffs in Church Bay was dived to try to re-locate previous records of the rare tube anemone, *Arachnanthus sarsi*. The seabed was of sand and gravel with some maerl and pebbles. It did not contain *Arachnanthus* and the seabed did not have sufficient muddy sand content to be suitable. There were however red and brown seaweeds colonising the pebbles including sugar kelp *Saccharina latissima*, spotted scarf weed *Nitophyllum punctatum* and landladies wig *Desmarestia aculeata*.

3.4 Independent surveys

Independent surveys were carried out in Strangford Lough with 5 Observation forms completed from three sites. None of these were new sites and there were no significant changes reported.

4. Marine Conservation Zones

Seasearch has contributed to the ongoing process of the identification of Marine Conservation Zones in Northern Ireland during 2014, both by participation in DOENI organized workshops and also by putting forward two third party proposals. The two proposals put forward based on Seasearch data were the seagrass beds in Red Bay, Antrim which are the largest recorded in Northern Ireland and the infralittoral gullies and caves around Ardglass and Gunns Island (see above). Both proposals have been accepted for further consideration.

Seasearch had hoped to add further data to the proposals for MCZs at Outer Ards and Carlingford Lough. Unfortunately neither of the planned dives in these areas was able to go ahead.

5. Seasearch Northern Ireland programme for 2015

Support for Seasearch in Northern Ireland through the DOENI's heritage Grants Programme is only secured until 31st March 2015. A grant application was made in August 2014 for a further three year period but at the time of preparation of this report the position is uncertain and thus we are unable to make any significant plans for the 2015 season. Further collaboration with the Ulster Wildlife Trust is planned but other activities are currently uncertain.

6. Acknowledgments

Thanks to all volunteers and the dive community who have contributed to the Seasearch scheme for Northern Ireland in 2014.

Many thanks to Chris Wood (Seasearch National Coordinator) who came along for the Sea Anemones and Corals of Britain and Ireland weekend course and dives in Rathlin Island in September, marshaled the dives and provided identification expertise and his knowledge.

Thanks to Claire Goodwin who tutored The Marine Life Identification course, marshaled dives and provided taxonomic identification support. Additional thanks to Charmaine Beer for providing her knowledge, teaching the Marine Life Identification Course and the Observer course and her support throughout the year.

We are grateful to Exploris Aquarium Portaferry for the use of their Centre for a Seasearch Marine Life Identification course in May 2014.

Meditation Northern Ireland in Belfast kindly provided their centre for a Seasearch Observer course in August 2014.

Dolphin Sub Aqua Club, Aquaholics and North Irish Divers have supplied boat charter and local knowledge which assisted us in surveying new dive sites.

We thank Ulster Wildlife for financial support towards boat costs for the Glenarm and Isle of Muck survey 2014. Many thanks to Jade Berman who also marshaled dives and provided identification expertise to support the event..

We also thank the Department of the Environment Northern Ireland (Marine Division) for its continued financial support for Seasearch during 2014.



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