



Northern Ireland Annual Report 2019



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Introduction

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. 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 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 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/>).

2019 Summary

While we missed the heatwave and calm seas that we enjoyed in 2018, thankfully our Seasearchers are a tough bunch and we carried on, only having to postpone one dive boat day on our scheduled programme.

Once again we received funding from the Sea Deep and Living Seas projects, both run by Ulster Wildlife. This generous contribution covered 50% of costs for our 5* scheduled boat dive days, targeting shark, skate and ray habitats to inform Sea Deep, as well as under-recorded sites and priority habitats to support Living Seas.

In summary..

We ran:

- 4 boat dive days (8 dives in total)
- 5 shore dives
- 1 Observer Course
- 1 Sea Anemone ID Course
- 1 Underwater Photography Course

We trained:

- 8 new Seasearch Observers
- 10 divers in identifying sea anemone species
- 9 divers in improving their underwater photography skills

We received:

- 61 Seasearch forms

Other highlights

This year we tapped into the amazing photos being captured and shared by our divers and used these to produce and sell some shiny 2020 calendars!

The 'Blue Planet II effect' continues and as a result, in 2019, we focused on the marine litter problem through both gathering and recording. We engaged with local beach cleaning groups, carrying out underwater litter picks and even had some media coverage from [BBC NI!](#)

We capped off the year with an event at Ballyholme Yacht Club with talks from Sea Deep and renowned local underwater cameraman, John Chambers.

*Our Sea Deep funding Carlingford Lough boat dives were postponed due to poor weather and will be rescheduled for 2020



Photo credit Claire Goodwin

exploring the undersea world



2019 Calendar

Date	Event	Location	Cost
14 th April	Litter shore dive	Brompton	Free
27 th April	Sea Deep talk	Ballyholme Yacht Club	Free
25 th May	Observer Course	Portrush Coastal Zone	£30
26 th May	Anemone Course	Groomsport Boat House	£30
2 nd June	Litter shore dive	Brompton	Free
2 nd June	Shore dive	Orlock	Free
9 th June	Boat dives with DV Diving	Ardglass	£35
30 th June	Underwater Photography Course	Portaferry Marine Lab	£30
25 th July	Shore dive	Portmuck	Free
28 th July	Boat dives with Aquaholics	Portballintrae	£35
11 th August	Boat dives with DV Diving	Donaghadee	£35
7 th September	Boat dives with Louth Adventures	Greenore	£35
6 th October	Boat dives with Aquaholics	Cushendall	£35

For more information or to book a place please contact us at

seasearchni@gmail.com

or via Facebook: 'Seasearch NI'.



Training

Observer Course

25th May, Portrush

8 participants partook in an observer course run by N.I. coordinator, Sally, and national coordinator, Charlotte Bolton at the Portrush Coastal Zone.



Anemone Identification

26th May, Groomsport

In order to improve our identification skills for sea anemones, we invited Chris Wood, former Seasearch UK Coordinator and author of the Sea Anemones and Corals ID guide, over to teach us about local anemone species, key features and techniques for photography and identification. 10 took part in the course, which was followed up with a shore dive at Orlock Point.



Underwater Photography Skills

30th June, Portaferry

In order to help divers improve their skills in underwater photography, Bernard Picton ran a course for us at the Portaferry Marine Laboratory. Bernard shared his skills with 9 participants, explaining how best to capture marine species for identification purposes using various types of camera equipment. The course was classroom based, with a shore dive at the S.S. Empire Tana (Inner Lees) wreck at lunchtime to have a go at implementing Bernard's tips!



Diving and Recording

Belfast Lough

14th April, 2nd June and 21st September, Jenny Watt's Cove, Brompton (Litter dives)

Throughout the summer our divers played their part in highlighting the marine litter problem through carrying out litter collection, both above and below the water! As well as removing litter from the seabed, the Seasearch group have joined up with our friends from Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful and Citizen Sea to raise publicity regarding this issue locally, with BBC NI joining us at [Jenny Watt's Cove](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-northern-ireland-48556859) and interviewing our divers: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-northern-ireland-48556859>



Collecting litter above and below the water at Jenny Watt's Cove with friends from Keep NI Beautiful



Seasearch Divers talking to BBC NI post-dive



Joining up with our friends from Citizen Sea

7th September, Belfast Lough

Despite poor weather conditions, Dave Vincent and co. from DV Diving were able to adapt and allow us to explore two sites on the north side of Belfast Lough: [M.V. Normanby Hall](#) and [Blackhead](#) (a new site for Seasearch N.I.).

The visibility wasn't great on the Normanby Hall, making it tricky to stay on the wreck, but our divers still managed to get some great photos from the seabed, including a variety of crabs, anemones and the occasional feather star.

Blackhead is a beautiful spot, perhaps not the most exciting of dives (!) but a great option in a northerly wind and we always welcome information for more common species e.g. kelp!

Funding: Sea Deep



Blackhead



Ardglass

South County Down Coast

Ardglass, 9th June

Again the weather let us down, but again DV Diving helped us to find some near shore sites for us to explore at [Ardglass Harbour](#) and beneath [Ardglass Golf Course](#). Two great dives but unfortunately a lot of litter on the seabed, including mountains of golf balls (unsurprisingly!). One to revisit for next year in order to explore the gullies further round the corner.

Funding: Living Seas



Litter collected from Ardglass



Filling out forms (and warming up) in Ardglass!

North Coast

28th July, Rathlin

Rathlin never fails to disappoint! We were taken out by Richard Lafferty (Aquaholics) and explored two sites: the boulder slope beneath the [White Cliffs](#) and a new site for Seasearch at [Cloghadoo Bank](#). Unfortunately the strong currents made for a short dive at Cloghadoo Bank (Sally's fault!), but we had a great day out and recorded a great variety of nudibranchs and spotted the target elasmobranch, a lesser spotted catshark.

Funding: Sea Deep



Lesser spotted Catshark beneath the White Cliffs



Post-dive in Cushendall – happy divers!

East Antrim Coast

6th October, Cushendall

Surely the dives of the year? This time, the conditions were perfect for us as we headed out of Cushendall again with Aquaholics. The first dive was on the [Cushendun Maerl Beds](#) where the colours were simply epic, with the bright pink (albeit patchy) maerl and other encrusting pink algae, covered in a fleece of brittlestars. For our second dive we revisited the [Waterfoot MCZ Seagrass Bed](#), spreading our divers across the site to assess the density of the seabed and the species living on it.

Funding: Sea Deep



Brittlestars on the Cushendun Maerl Beds



Waterfoot Seagrass Bed

22nd September, Portmuck

Peter Steele (North Irish Divers) kindly invited us to dive off Portmuck on his new boat in September. Another day where we were restricted by the weather but we managed one dive on the north end of the Isle of Muck.

Funding: North Irish Divers



Nudibranch *Cadlina laevis* at Isle of Muck

End of Year Event

On 5th December we celebrated the end of a great year for Seasearch N.I. by inviting our Seasearch group, their friends and family to join us for some talks, prize giving and drinks at Ballyholme Yacht Club. Following a 'round up' of the year, we heard from Heidi McIlvenny about the Sea Deep project and the important input from Seasearchers. Our guest speaker for the evening was John Chambers, local underwater cameraman who filmed the famous octopus sequence for Blue Planet II, as well as other marine wildlife documentaries such as Oceans, and TV shows



Phil Wilkinson receiving prize for most forms

including Casualty and Strictly Come Dancing Underwater! This was a great chance to introduce Seasearch to some new faces as well as selling some of our 2020 Calendars. The night was capped off by presenting Phil Wilkinson with the prize for the most number of forms submitted in 2019 (17!).



Heidi McIlvenny



John Chambers

Acknowledgements

There are a number of individuals and organisations who made a vital contribution to maintaining Seasearch in Northern Ireland in 2019. Thanks go to:

The Marine Conservation Society for coordinating Seasearch at a national level and for supporting our group locally, Heidi McIlvenny (Sea Deep project officer) and Gala Podgornik (Living Seas project officer) for funding 5 boat days (10 dives) in 2019, and to Ulster Wildlife in general for supporting the project. Thanks to Chris Wood and Bernard Picton for running the Anemone and Photography courses, and to Charlotte Bolton for helping out with the Observer Course. Thanks also to Portrush Coastal Zone and Portaferry Marine Laboratory for providing facilities for these courses. Thanks to DV Diving, Aquaholics and North Irish Divers for continuing to support Seasearch N.I., sharing their knowledge and keeping us safe.

Finally, thanks to all the volunteers who participated in 2019. You have made a vital contribution to recording marine life around Northern Ireland and your enthusiasm, commitment, records and photos are central to its protection.

