

Seasearch West of Scotland

2021 Report

Owen Paisley, Seasearch West Co-ordinator

taobh Siar na h-Alba



sireach na mara

www.seasearch.org.uk



Given the difficulties in organising diving a lot more snorkelling was carried out in 2021. Here Seasearch volunteer Alain Karmitz takes part in a snorkel survey on Mull



There was a lot more activity in 2021 than the previous year but just as in 2020 Scottish dive kit and Seasearch survey equipment sat gathering dust for a lot of the time.

2021- Another Year of Covid

As in the previous year Seasearch activity on the west coast of Scotland was severely impacted by Covid. Planned dives were cancelled, boat charters didn't take place and generally activity was at a low level, albeit higher than in 2020.

Despite all the difficulties a total of 164 forms were completed for the 2021 season. Of these 83 were Observer forms and 80 Surveyor forms with a single Crawfish recording form. This was an unusually high number of Surveyor forms as in previous years the ratio of Observer to Surveyor forms has been roughly 60:40. The almost even split between the two in 2021 may be an encouraging sign that the intensive training effort over the last several years is beginning to bear fruit. An alternative explanation is that those volunteers filling in Surveyor forms are the most committed and carried on diving despite Covid.



In the absence of boats, snorkelling allowed volunteers to reach otherwise remote areas.



The focus on shallow snorkelling surveys during 2021 resulted in an increase in reports of some rarely recorded species such as these native oysters.



Shore surveys also produced some interesting records, including this bed of *Ascophyllum nodosum* *ecad mackii* at Loch Melfort.

The total of 164 forms was also an improvement over the 2020 total of 125 forms but still some way behind the pre-covid totals of over 200 forms.

Two online Observer courses were run in February and May with the first attracting 17 participants and the second having sixteen.

During the year seven people completed their qualifying dives and were signed off as Seasearch Observers.

The Seasearch Year

January to March

As in previous years much of the available time in these months was taken up checking forms and chasing up late forms which resulted in a final total of 129 forms for the 2020 season. Preparations and planning for further online courses also took place following on from the success of the 2020 courses. Assistance and advice was given to the other Scottish co-ordinators who were preparing to run their first online courses.

An online Observer course was run at the end of February with 17 participants. Unlike previous courses only one person was based in England. The other 16 were based all over Scotland including Aberdeen, Oban, Fort William, Dundee, Stirling, Edinburgh and Arran. Covid restrictions and the geographical spread of the participants made an after course dive impossible. Instead the students were asked to undertake dives or snorkels in their local areas and if that was impossible they were asked to carry out a shore walk. This enabled most of them to complete practice forms which were then e-mailed back to the tutor for feedback. This worked well in that most of the students completed two practice forms and received feedback. The downside was that it took considerably longer than the traditional face-to-face feedback.

The February course also set a new record for the highest number of Seasearch tutors involved. Owen Paisley and Karen Boswarva were the main hosts but the course was also observed by Scotland coordinators Iain Dixon and Paul Kay along with trainee tutor Sarah Bowen.

Plans were made to commence organised diving surveys again with plans for Loch Craginish and Loch Fyne to start but a resurgence of Covid put everything on hold again.

April to June

Development of online teaching methods continued with follow up sessions organised for those who attended the February course and who requested additional help.



Another interesting shore based survey record was some mixed oyster/blue mussel beds in a west coast sealoch.

The lack of diving meant that time was available to process data from the Wester Ross maerl transects photographed in 2019. An analysis of the percentage live maerl cover was carried out along with general notes on the apparent health of the different beds. The photographs were labelled in sequence and arranged into appropriate folders before being passed on to Sea Change Wester Ross.



A pleasant surprise was the recording of 1km long patch of eel grass in West Loch Tarbert.

Hopes were high that diving would resume in the summer and oxygen sets and dive kit were serviced in anticipation of this. A second online Observer course was run in the first week of May this time with 16 participants. These were a mixture of a snorkelling group based in Ullapool and a couple of ROV operators interested in using their ROVs to gather data. This course represented a broadening out from the traditional Seasearch scuba diver focus and required some tweaking of the forms and database to allow for snorkel and ROV forms.

Trials were also carried out of an oyster recording form to be used by Seasearch volunteers in organised oyster surveys.

July to September

It had been hoped that these months would be the start of a resurgence in organised Seasearch diving. Some diving did take place but the lingering uncertainties and difficulties of Covid prevented much activity taking place. Organised diving was restricted to small groups diving in areas such as West Loch Tarbert and Campbeltown Loch where valuable information on native oyster distribution was collected.



A less happy discovery was more evidence of past Serpulid reefs, also in West Loch Tarbert.

In September things finally started moving again. Highlights of the month were the mapping of a 1km long eel grass bed in West Loch Tarbert by a team of Seasearch snorkellers and the recording of two large native oysters beds by another team of snorkellers.

Despite the lack of large organised dive trips the participants in the courses run earlier in the year persevered and seven of them completed their five qualifying dives. The use of e-mail and zoom allowed personalised feedback to be provided in a way that would have been impossible in previous years. This was particularly useful when it came to position fixing, something that seems to cause many people difficulty. Using zoom it was possible to talk through selecting the preferred position format in Google Earth Pro with all the steps visible on the screen. It is hope that this approach will reduce the number of anomalous positions in future.

October to December

Forms had been trickling in through the year and with the resumption in diving in September there was a late influx. By October the number of forms received had reached 76 and this increased to 100 by the end of November. A final flurry of forms from December into January resulted in a final total of 164 forms from 2021.

Lessons learned and future plans

Although Covid severely reduced Seasearch activity in both 2020 and 2021 the number of courses completed and survey forms returned show that there is a significant group of sports divers interested in marine conservation and willing to devote considerable time and effort on the Seasearch project. The pandemic allowed the trialling of online courses and individual online mentoring, both of which were a great success. Looking forward to 2022 it is hoped that this blended system of teaching and recording will allow even more sports divers to take part in Seasearch, one of the oldest and most respected citizen science diving projects in the world.

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Seasearch is a volunteer underwater survey project run by MCS which encourages recreational divers & snorkellers to contribute towards the conservation of the marine environment.

