



After many years of campaigning, the cause of marine conservation in Scotland has made a number of recent leaps forward. Our regular MCS contributor Calum Duncan reports on progress ...

# Three Cheers

IN 2008, marine conservation good news stories are like buses, you wait ages for one and then three arrive at once.

First, the announcement that Lamlash Bay is to become the first Community Marine Conservation Area in Scotland, and indeed the UK. Second, the first real-time closure of a cod spawning ground was introduced and third, Forth Ports plc rejected proposals for ship-to-ship oil transfers to go ahead in the Firth of Forth. All announcements warmly welcomed by MCS, but the journey has only just started, more of which later. First to Arran.



Map of the Clyde showing the 107 sites that COAST divers have 'seasearched', from Otter Ferry in Loch Fyne to the Isle of Sanda. The main focus is on south east Arran - Lamlash Bay is under the biggest cluster.

## Coasting to conservation

As **SCOTTISH DIVER** readers will know (see March / April 2005 edition and others), the Community of Arran Seabed Trust (COAST) have worked tirelessly. You can read about their dogged determination on the political front elsewhere in this issue, but I would also like to highlight the excellent Seasearch work undertaken by divers from COAST.

To help underpin their successful proposal, they sought Seasearch Observer training from MCS Scotland in 2003 and Seasearch Surveyor training in 2006 to enable them to describe the important seabeds, including maerl, found in Lamlash Bay.

Don Macneish, John and Sean Ferris, Dave Butcher, Martin Wood, and particularly Howard Wood, have contributed an impressive 107 Seasearch records from sites in Lamlash Bay, Whiting Bay, the isle of Pladda, Kilbrannan Sound, sound of Bute, Loch Fyne and the isle of Sanda, and in the process become experts for their local patch. Howard alone has contributed 50 Seasearch forms, 15 at Surveyor level, making him among the most active Seasearchers in the UK.

Current Chairman of COAST, Howard said: "COAST was started by two members of ScotSAC who saw with their own eyes through the 70s, 80s and 90s the diminishing marine biodiversity in the waters around their island. With the help of Seasearch training we then started to survey what really was there. This enabled both ourselves and Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) to move

forward the community's plans for some marine protection for Lamlash Bay."

Evidence that COAST divers gathered through Seasearch ensured that a sewage outfall was re-routed to avoid discharging on a fragile bed of maerl in Lamlash Bay, one of the healthiest in the Clyde. The information collected also helped provide the underpinning evidence for their proposed marine conservation area in Lamlash Bay.

Whilst the Scottish Government is referring to the proposals as a Community Marine Conservation Area, COAST is keen to emphasise that the north section of Lamlash Bay in the proposal will be a 'no take zone'.

Among the highlights that COAST has recorded are some of the healthiest beds of maerl in the Clyde in north Lamlash Bay; sea grass beds off Skipness Point, Pirnmill, and the most extensive, in Whiting Bay. COAST has also made the first records from tideswept reefs rich in life off the isle of Pladda and, with Seasearch west co-ordinator Owen Paisley, of the isle of Sanda.

Interesting species records from Sean Ferris from Lamlash Bay have included tadpole fish and snake blenny. Their dives have also found evidence of seabed damage from mobile fishing gear at Skipness and west of Inchmarnock.

## The end of the beginning

The gist of COAST's Seasearch work has contributed to the Firth of Clyde section of 'Finding NIMAs', an exciting new report that MCS has recently completed with other environment groups in Scotland to help push for a network of



COAST Seasearchers Howard Wood, current chairman and Don Macneish, former chairman (c) C.Duncan/MCS



Long-spined scorpion fish on maerl bed - image courtesy of Howard Wood

marine protected areas. COAST's excellent work on Arran has been community-driven to better protect Lamlash Bay and contribute to making scallop dredging more sustainable in the Clyde, what we also need in Scotland, and throughout the UK, is a whole network of sites to protect important areas of sea and seabed for a range of nationally important species and habitats.

We were therefore pleased that Richard Lochhead announced in June 2007 that there would be a Scottish Marine Bill. Great news after many years of campaigning, but the real hard work is still to come! We need to make sure that this new legislation protects, restores and enhances Scotland's coasts and seas, through both better management and better protection. We are pushing for the bill to put in place a marine planning system, a marine management organisation to oversee the planning, and proper protection for marine life, including a network of what we are calling 'Nationally Important Marine Areas' (NIMAs).

**What's in a name?**

Currently less than 1% of Scotland's inshore waters are protected within European Special Areas of Conservation

(SAC) that largely rely on voluntary measures to protect the features of interest. We greatly welcomed the scallop dredging bans in Loch Creran SAC and Firth of Lorn SAC (albeit temporary) but there is a long way to go. European legislation can only protect 9 rather broad habitats and five species in designated marine SAC sites. So, Scotland needs a comprehensive network of NIMAs:

- to protect nationally important species like common skate, basking shark and black guillemot; habitats like flameshell reefs, deepwater muds and seagrass beds and landscape scale features like sea lochs that are not adequately protected by existing European laws
- to meet international commitments by 2010, including that for an 'ecologically coherent network of well-managed marine protected areas'
- to help regenerate our seas, bolstering their productivity and resilience and ensuring that they can continue to support economic activity and social well-being.

This network would consist of areas:

- > representative of Scotland's key marine habitats;
- > of exceptional biodiversity;
- > to protect nationally important marine wildlife;
- > to protect feeding, spawning, mating and migration sites.

It would complement the existing network of sites designated under the EU Birds and Habitats Directives and each area would be chosen according to ecological criteria and managed according to its individual needs. Some areas might make little difference to human activities taking place in them, while others might need more protection from damage and greater restrictions in place. Find out

more at [www.savescottishseas.org/pdfs/LINKFindingNIMAs.pdf](http://www.savescottishseas.org/pdfs/LINKFindingNIMAs.pdf).

**Scotland's seas need you!**

What has this to do with divers? Well, as the COAST example illustrates, hopefully a great deal. Although we have amassed an impressive total of over 1,200 Seasearch records for Scotland since the year 2000; and those records have helped identify important sites such as those highlighted by COAST and others reported in this column previously, there are many other sites awaiting discovery, recording and/or possible protection. This is where Seasearch comes in.

Yes, we do know a fair amount about our seabed life, but there is still so much more to be found and cherished around our enormous coastline. We really have only scratched the surface.

As you read this, we will have a schedule of Seasearch events organised but, as with COAST, there is nothing stopping you diving in, exploring your local patch and contributing to marine conservation in Scotland first-hand. Without getting wet, you could also join MCS and help in the campaign to save Scottish seas.



Black Guillemot or Tystie is another species that would benefit from NIMA protection - image (c) RSPB

> To join MCS, visit [www.mcsuk.org](http://www.mcsuk.org)  
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