



Cuttlefish are one of many sensitive marine species affected by habitat damage (George Brown)

Calum Duncan

outlines why various

marine protection

initiatives like

Seasearch can help

ensure healthy seas

for the future ...

Banking On Biodiversity

SOME YEARS AGO, I wrote about 'Crunch Time for Scotland's Seas' (**SCOTTISH DIVER** Jan/Feb 2006). Our 'Silent Seas' report warns that 27 marine vertebrates, including common skate, angel shark and Atlantic halibut, compared to three on land, are threatened with the possibility of extinction and only 8 of 47 UK fish stocks are healthy. All part of the 'resource crunch', as fossil fuels, fisheries, metal ores, water, biodiversity and other precious resources become scarcer and scarcer on our lonely blue marble. Closer to our own pockets of course has been the 'credit crunch'. Cheery stuff all!

MPA insurance policy

But surely, if this teaches us anything, it is that we have to manage our resources, both natural and virtual, with prudence and an eye to the long-term, rather than with greed and short-termism. Prudent banking means safely investing capital where it can slowly increase in value in a risk-free environment. Leaving aside my own personal views on economic mismanagement, there is of course a parallel here with 'natural capital', including that within our seas and oceans.

Whilst sustainable management of our coasts and seas requires the value of marine biodiversity to be part of all decision-making (the 'three-pillared approach' to nature conservation, see **SCOTTISH DIVER** Sept/Oct 2008), marine protected areas (MPAs) are crucial to this prudent approach. We will never know enough about how marine ecosystems work not to hedge our bets with a comprehensive network of MPAs. By protecting some of the most sensitive, most biologically diverse and most important parts of our coasts and seas, we are investing in the future.

Quite apart from the fact that we are committed to doing this through international agreements anyway, a comprehensive MPA network would provide a sound insurance policy for Scotland's seas. A range of protection levels is needed, including sites that are more highly protected, where statutory measures prevent extractive, depositional or other damaging uses. Such MPAs would help protect particularly sensitive features, support the recovery of ecological processes, increase environmental resilience and further our understanding of 'natural' systems.

Our voices heard

Last summer, in response to the Scottish Marine Bill consultation, **SCOTTISH DIVER** readers contributed to the MCS-chaired Save Scottish Seas campaign, which generated a total of 4,756 responses to the consultation calling for, amongst other points:

Effective protection for our marine wildlife, including a robust network of marine protected areas for marine life important to Scotland, designated using scientific criteria alone

It is heartening to note that of the non-campaign responses, 59 supported a new MPA power and only 3 did not. By the time you read this the Scottish Marine Bill, including measures for nationally important MPAs, may well be before the Scottish Parliament. We have to keep letting our elected representatives know that we care:

- MCS has teamed up with the Co-op to launch our Marine Reserves Now campaign. Visit www.marinereservesnow.org and let Scottish Cabinet Secretary Richard Lochhead know that you support calls for a comprehensive network of MPAs.

- The joint Scottish campaigning is also continuing and we will be lobbying at Parliamentary events and Spring party conferences to make sure our MSPs, particularly those on the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee, understand the value of our marine biodiversity and why we need to protect it properly. See www.savescottishseas.org

You can also make sustainable choices when buying fish, informed by a visit to the MCS www.fishonline.org website.

Seasearch holds the key

So where does Seasearch come in? As part of the UK-wide campaign for MPAs, we are compiling a list of Seasearch-identified sites that we think merit a high level of protection. Over the years, over 1,500 Scottish Seasearch records have contributed to our knowledge of valuable undersea places, routinely written about in these pages and not least Lamlash Bay, Arran. Almost 250 records were returned from Scotland in 2008 alone, from Loch Fyne to the Moray Firth, for which many thanks to all!

In addition to the biodiversity written about in recent issues, Susie Whiten recorded flame shells in the artificial slate reefs of Ballachulish in July, another 'high-rise' finding (see Owen's update below), Chris Rickard recorded masses of the mud-loving sea slug *Philine aperta* in Loch Creran and K Burns and Trevor Warner recorded marine life on many wrecks in the Sound of Mull. Exciting Seasearch plans for 2009 include Luce Bay, Lamlash Bay, Firth of Lorn and the outer Moray Firth.

Momentum is gathering, our voices are being heard, and Seasearch has a crucial role to play in identifying the most valuable marine biodiversity assets in dire need of sound investment in a network of MPAs!



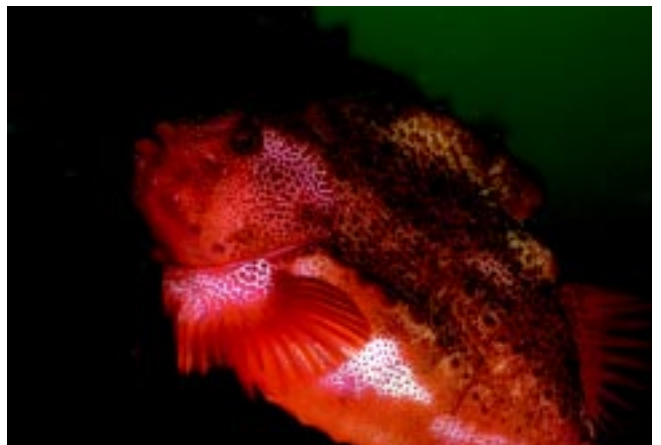
Area-based protection can also benefit commercial species like scallops (Mark Woombs)



Our seas are full of unseen splendour such as this graceful peacock worm (Mark Woombs)



Photographer and Seasearcher George Brown surveys fragile tall sea pens in Loch Nevis, another habitat in need of better protection (Mark Woombs)



A wary lumpsucker keeps an eye out for improved protection in future (George Brown)

Owen's Winter Tail

AS I WRITE this it seems to have been a long winter but already the snowdrops are popping up and training is coming to an end in the local swimming pool but still there's no sign of the water heating up.

As usual Seasearch on the west coast drops down a gear over the winter but we have enjoyed some successes. Despite ice on the roads, pleurisy and weather so cold we had to defrost a forestry padlock with hot tea to reach a dive site - the November Observer course in Tarbert went well.

In December diving took place off Tarbert, Loch Fyne and further south off Carradale. The dives off Tarbert turned up a northern sea fan, which was a bit of a surprise as there are no records of these in the Clyde and we didn't notice this one until checking the photographs afterwards.

Close inspection of the photo indicated that the seafan wasn't attached which begged the question, how did it get there? Theories included:

- It fell off the back of a clam dredger which had been fishing out to the west;
- It had been washed up from much

deeper water;

- Somebody had planted it there to confuse us.

For now it remains a mystery, but if anyone else sees northern seafans in the Clyde I'd love to hear from them.

Diving in January was at the Quarry tearooms, Loch Fyne with such a bad forecast that a planned BSAC training day there was cancelled. Seasearchers are made of sterner stuff though and despite hail and gale force winds, two training dives were accomplished. What's more we found live flame shells living in the quarry spoil breakwater. These wonderful little animals with their bright orange tentacles are normally associated with flat seabeds. Usually the first sign of their presence is a strange spongy feel to the seabed, this is caused by them constructing nests and binding the seabed together into a kind of duvet under which live all sorts of other animals. Finding the flame shells happily living in a near vertical boulder slope was something of a surprise - the first high rise flame shell reef ever recorded in the Clyde!

Plans for the spring include looking for

horse mussel beds and fireworks anemones in upper Loch Fyne, searching for seafan anemones in the Firth of Lorne and diving the wonderful Sanda archipelago off the south end of Kintyre. For more information on any of these contact me at seasearch.west@btinternet.com or give me a ring on 01880 730262.

Oh - the Winter's Tail? That was a sperm whale tail washed up on the west coast of Kintyre in January. The tail was almost 12 feet across but where's the rest of the body?

Owen Paisley
Seasearch West Coast co-ordinator



For general Seasearch enquiries in 2009 visit www.seasearch.org.uk or contact Calum on 0131 226 6360, email scotland@mcsuk.org