



# OUR LIVING SEAS COUNTY ANTRIM



Dip below the surface and discover why  
our seas are worth protecting



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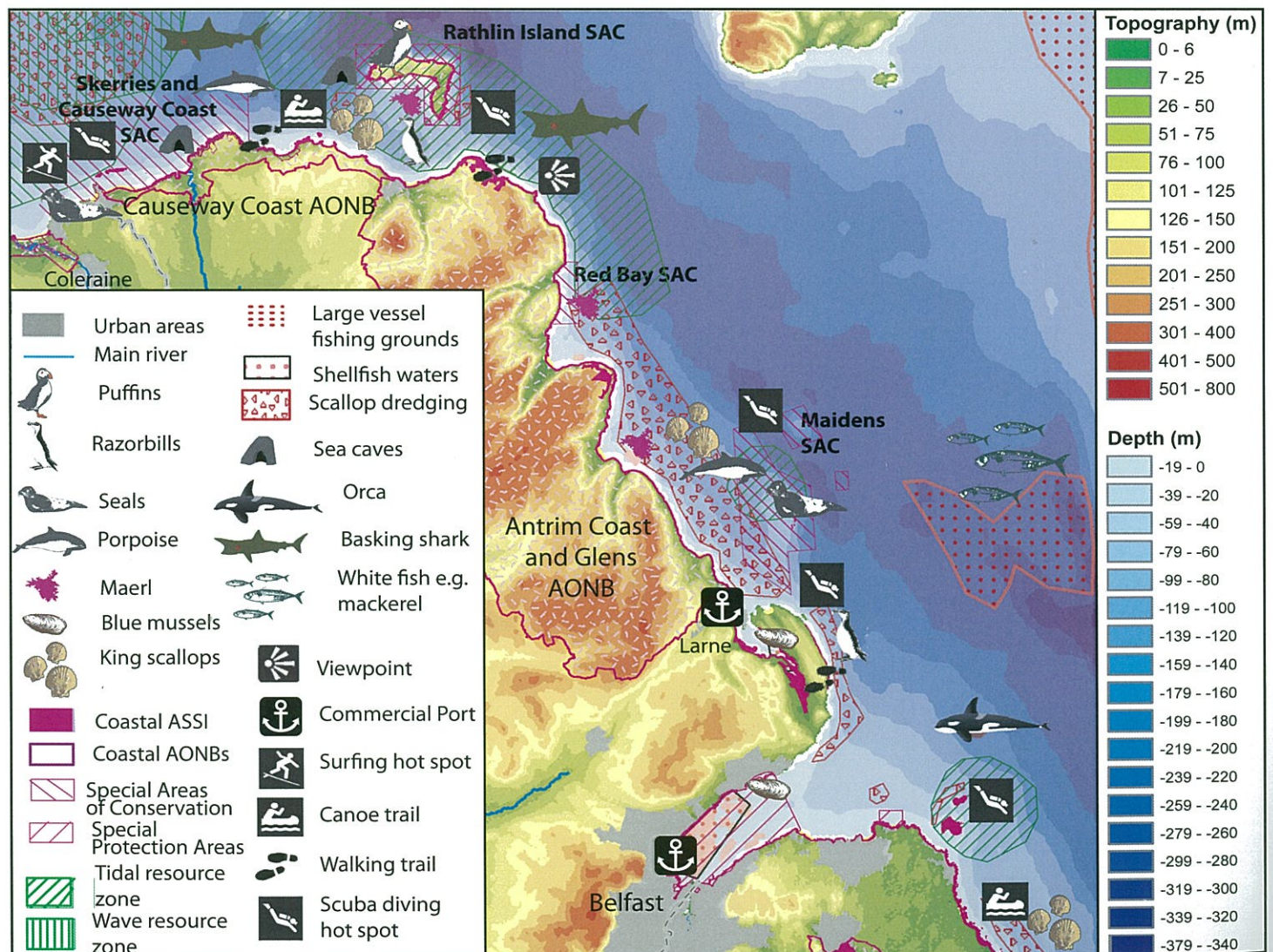
*Living Seas* is Ulster Wildlife's vision for the future of Northern Ireland's seas. Within *Living Seas*, wildlife thrives, from the depths of the ocean to the coastal shallows.

Many people in Northern Ireland are not aware of the wealth of nature that lives in and visits our local seas and shores. Much of this world is hidden beneath the waves, and Ulster Wildlife is working to raise awareness of our hidden gems and why they are worth protecting.

World famous for the spectacular Giant's Causeway, the County Antrim coast is breathtaking - from the gentle rolling glens to the dramatic cliffs of Torr Head, Fair Head and Rathlin Island, and the majestic Dunluce and Carrickfergus Castles. The Skerries and Causeway Coast Special Area of Conservation is currently the only place in the UK with harbour porpoises listed as a feature of its European protection.

This document provides a short introduction to some of County Antrim's important marine habitats and species, and how the seas are used around the County Antrim coastline.

## Map of some of the wildlife hotspots and activities around the County Antrim Coast





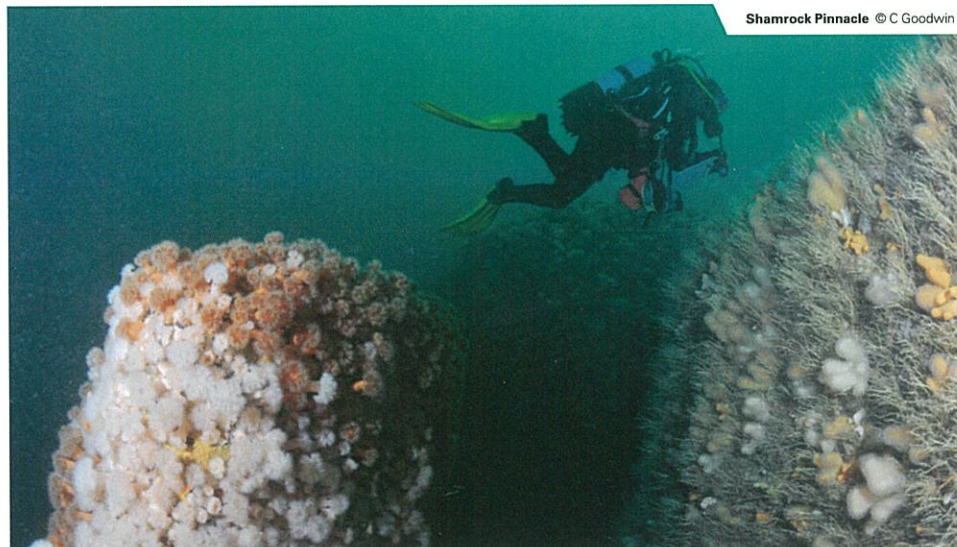
# IMPORTANT MARINE HABITATS FOUND OFF THE CO. ANTRIM COASTLINE



Dragonet Fish on Maerl © C Goodwin



Sea Caves, Antrim Coast



Shamrock Pinnacle © C Goodwin

## MAERL

These pink 'twiglets' are a slow-growing coralline seaweed; not attached to the seabed like most seaweeds but 'free living', rolling along the seafloor at the mercy of tidal currents and waves. Maerl pieces often interlock branches so that over hundreds and thousands of years it builds up into thick beds. The most extensive maerl beds in Northern Ireland are found off the Glens of Antrim, in Red Bay, off Garron Point and Ballygally Head.

Many creatures, such as the dragonet fish (pictured) and unusual red seaweeds, call maerl beds home including commercially valuable species like young scallops. The maerl bed in Red Bay is now protected as a Special Area of Conservation.

## SEA CAVES

There are amazing caves above and below the water's surface along the Causeway Coast and around Rathlin Island. Sea caves are important because they provide a home to unusual and unique creatures.

The low levels of light limit algae/seaweed growth inside the caves, so sponges and soft corals dominate the space. One species that is found within the caves at Rathlin but not elsewhere in Northern Ireland is the soft coral (*Alyconium hibernicum*), known as pink dead man's fingers.

There are even cave-breeding grey seals in the caves around Rathlin Island.

## ROCK PINNACLES & REEFS

The seabed around County Antrim has fine examples of ancient volcanic rock such as Shamrock Pinnacle (submerged 5 miles NW of Rathlin Island) and the group of peaks around the Maidens (east of Larne).

These rock pinnacles are found in moderately deep water, and are swept by very strong tidal currents.

This provides a home for current-loving creatures such as communities of oaten pipes hydroid (*Tubularia indivisa*) and dead man's fingers (*Alcyonium digitatum*).

The Maidens have excellent examples of these communities which are internationally rare and therefore the Maidens is a candidate Special Area of Conservation.



# IMPORTANT MARINE SPECIES FOUND OFF THE CO. ANTRIM COASTLINE



Wintery Ball Sponge © B Picton



Harbour Porpoise © F Graner



Atlantic Puffins © L Newton

## WINTERY BALL SPONGE

There are many sponges (which are filter feeding animals) off Northern Ireland, with Rathlin Island harbouring over 50% of the UK's types of sponge, including 29 species new to science, discovered in 2007.

Wintery ball sponge (*Tethya hibernica*) is one of the new sponge species, which looks like a small dirty yellow foam ball and has been found more recently around the Maidens on wave-sheltered but tide-swept sloping bedrock.

*Tethya* sponges have beautiful skeletons made of glass including miniature stars. They can reproduce by creating mini clones of the adult ball sponge which grow off as a mini ball on the end of a stalk and then attach themselves nearby as their glass spines act like Velcro to attach them to another sponge or the seabed.

## ATLANTIC PUFFIN

The Atlantic puffin (*Fratercula arctica*) is one of the most well known seabird species. They nest at Rathlin Island - which is the only colony in Northern Ireland. The puffin is on the Amber List of Birds of Conservation Concern, as its overall numbers are in decline and it is vulnerable due to the small number of sites at which it breeds. Puffins arrive on Rathlin in May where they are reunited with their lifelong partners for the breeding season. In late July the pairs bid each other a fond farewell by knocking beaks before departing en masse, not to return until the following spring. The puffin's diet is mainly fish and primarily sandeels, and it is believed that the reduction in sandeel numbers may be responsible for the decline in puffins. Rathlin Island is protected as an Area of Special Scientific Interest, Special Protection Area and Special Area of Conservation.

## HARBOUR PORPOISE

The harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) is the smallest of the cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) we have in Europe. They are sociable animals, often seen in groups ranging between two and eight.

They can be spotted close to the shore, in harbours or sometimes they even venture up rivers! They have an average length of 1.5m and normally live for about 10-20 years.

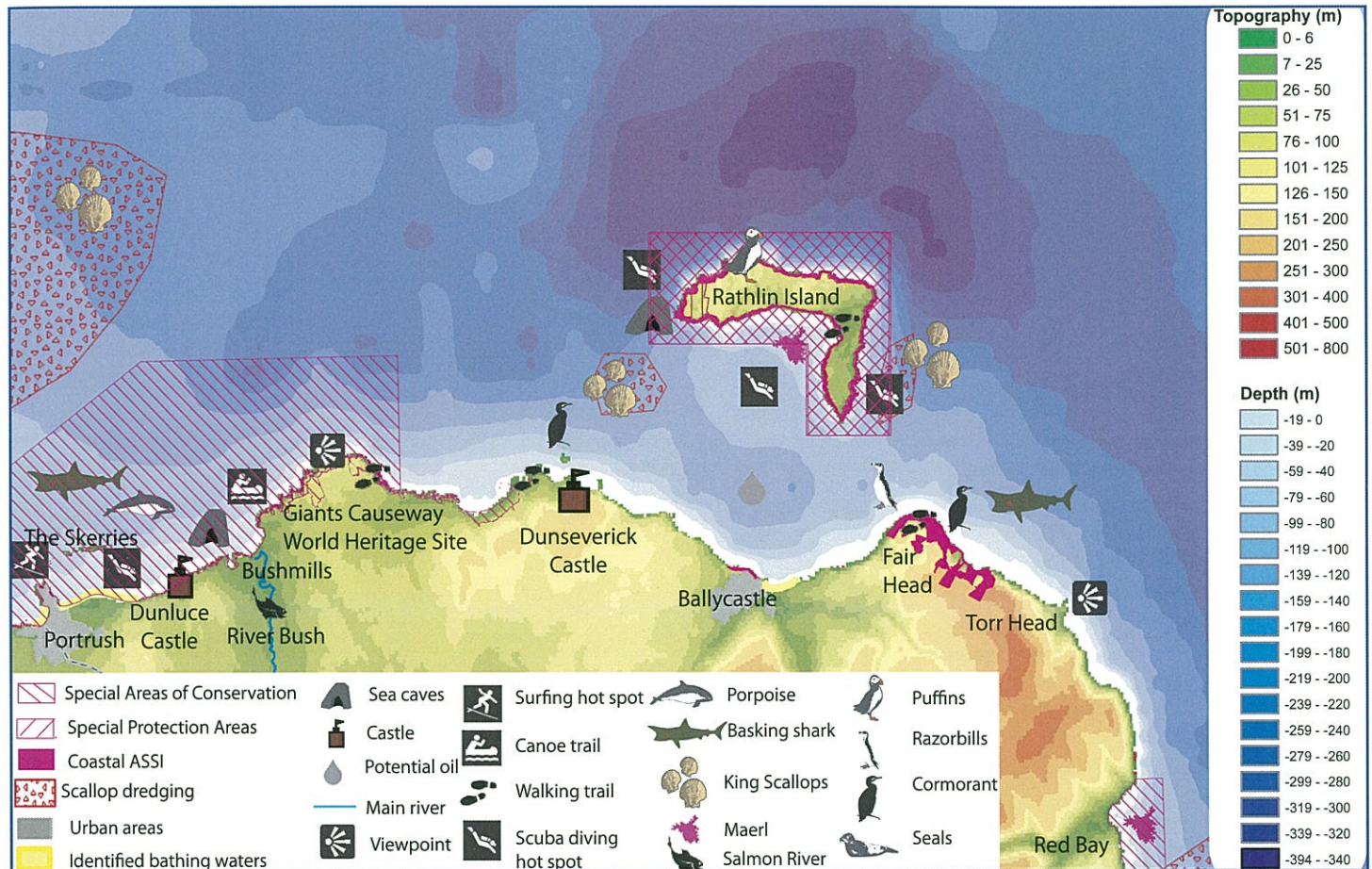
Fish such as herring, mackerel, sprat and pollock make up the bulk of the harbour porpoise's diet with an occasional squid or octopus. The Skerries near Portrush is the first Special Area of Conservation in the UK to include the harbour porpoise as a feature for its European protection.



# SPECIAL PLACES FOR SEA LIFE AROUND CO. ANTRIM

## NORTH ANTRIM COAST

Map of some of the wildlife hotspots and activities



Some of the best diving in the world is off the Antrim coast. There are colourful carpets of soft corals, sponges and hydroids which cover near-vertical rock faces and sea arches off Rathlin, the Skerries, Shamrock Pinnacle and the Maidens; rolling mounds of pink coral-like seaweed known as 'maerl', which are found among the underwater drumlins off the Glens; thick kelp forests, which fringe the rocky coastline; and calm seagrass beds that fringe sheltered bays.

The diverse geology also provides enclaves for rarer life, such as the sponges found in sea caves around the North Coast and Rathlin Island, and the burrowing shellfish found on the softer limestone rock near Portrush.

## BELFAST LOUGH

Belfast Lough is an important commercial harbour, but it is also of European importance with two Special Protection Areas for seabirds, which overwinter on the mudflats. It is also a Ramsar site (wetlands of international importance designated under the Ramsar Convention).

There are internationally important numbers of common redshank in winter, and the site also regularly supports nationally important numbers of common shelduck, Eurasian oystercatcher, purple sandpiper, dunlin, black-tailed godwit, bar-tailed godwit, Eurasian curlew and ruddy turnstone.

Underwater, young 'seed' blue mussels and cockles sometimes settle and both of these have been fished in the past but not currently.

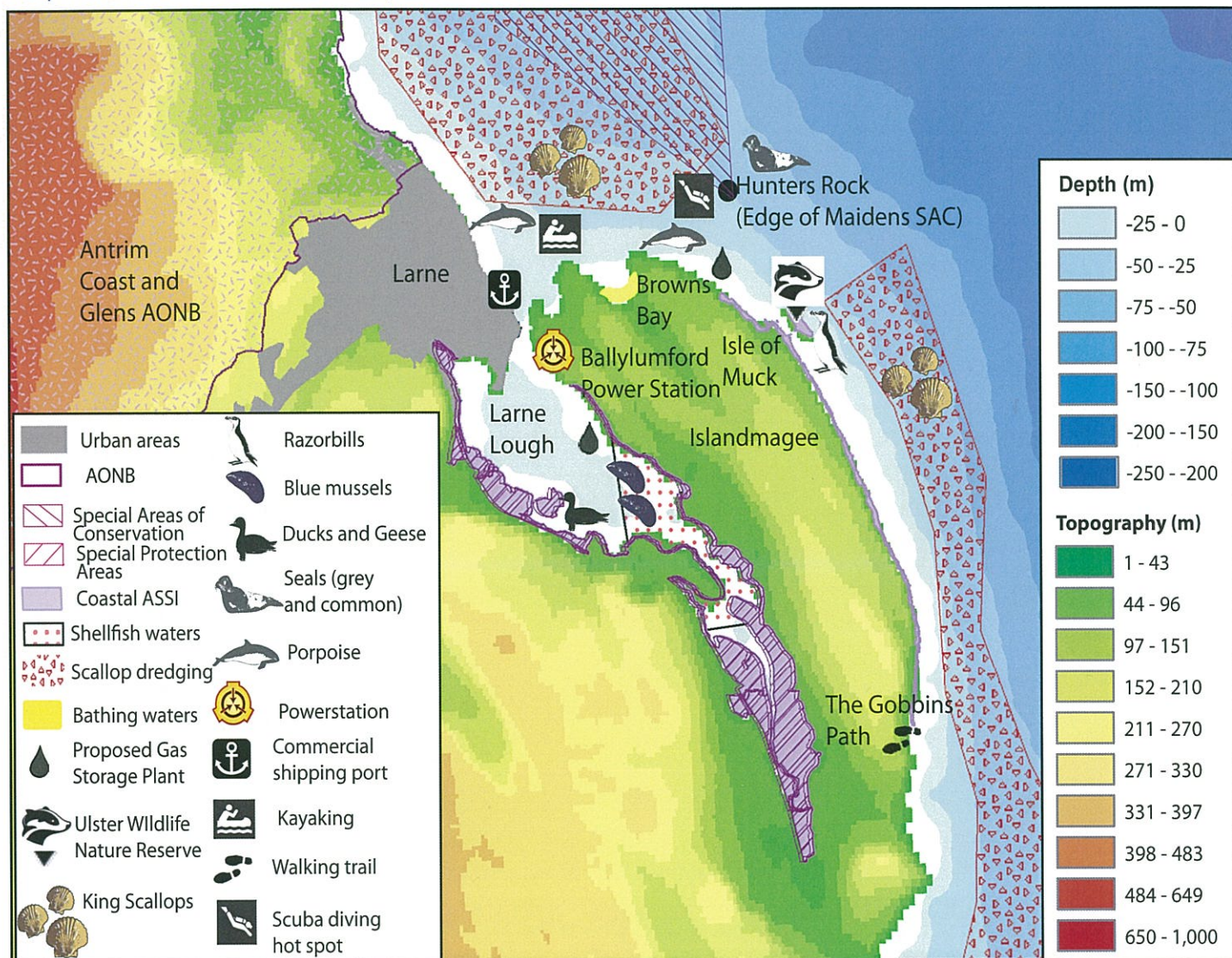




# SPECIAL PLACES FOR SEA LIFE AROUND CO. ANTRIM

## LARNE LOUGH

Map of some of the wildlife hotspots and activities



Larne Lough is a hotspot for birds and is of international importance as a Ramsar site, European Special Protection Area, and an Area of Special Scientific Interest, which all have the same boundary. The lough regularly supports internationally important numbers of pale-bellied brent geese, and nationally important numbers of breeding populations of roseate and common terns. Larne Lough is a busy area, with Ballylumford Power Station, a busy port, fishing and recreational activities, as well as the proposed gas storage underneath the lough - so it is important to get the balance right with new developments to prevent the disturbance of the wildlife here.

## ISLE OF MUCK

This Ulster Wildlife island nature reserve, off Islandmagee in Co. Antrim, has the third largest colony of cliff-nesting seabirds in Northern Ireland. Kittiwake, guillemot, fulmar and razorbill all breed here and peregrine falcons commonly hunt over the island. You can catch sight of puffins, otters, common and grey seals and porpoises offshore. The populations of breeding sea birds on the island are monitored by our staff on an annual basis.





# HOW WE USE THE COASTLINE AND SEAS AROUND CO. ANTRIM

As well as being important for our local sea life, our local coasts and seas are very important for people for social and economic reasons. Our seas are busier than ever, with increasing use of their resources from fishing to renewable energy developments, recreational opportunities to communications cables being laid. We need to make sure we get the balance right so that we have healthy seas for our future.

Ulster Wildlife regularly responds to consultations on, for example, plans for aquaculture, fishing, and energy developments around our shores and provides scientific expertise for a range of monitoring groups and committees.

Below are just a few of the ways the seas are used around Co. Antrim.

## INDUSTRY

The Belfast and Larne ports provide vital transport links and industrial bases, along with the power stations of Ballylumford and Kilroot. Potential future infrastructure development will continue this close relationship with the sea, with plans for gas storage facilities in Larne Lough and Islandmagee and new undersea cabling linking sites in Larne and Belfast with Scotland, to facilitate offshore renewable energy installations being considered.



Belfast Port © R Kirk

## FISHING

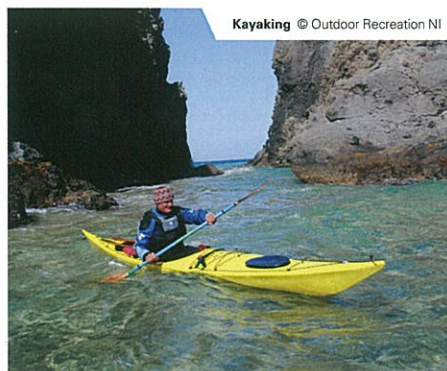
Commercial fishing is mainly potting for lobster and crab off the coastal fringe reefs and the offshore reef areas such as Shamrock Pinnacle, the Skerries and the Maidens. Scallop fishing is also important, particularly off Islandmagee but also in pockets along the east coast including east of Rathlin Island. Demersal fishing for whitefish takes place further offshore, though this is much reduced from previous levels, in part due to the collapse of the cod fishery.



Lobster © S Parker

## TOURISM & LEISURE

The Antrim coastline has been popular for centuries for tourism and leisure. Whitehead was developed in late Victorian times as a weekend getaway for busy city folk, with access to the Gobbins Cliff Path along the coastline of Islandmagee. In 1855 the railway line was opened linking Belfast to Portrush, allowing access to the wide sandy beaches of the North Coast. Businesses linked to watersports, including scuba diving, sea angling, kayaking, surfing and coasteering, have grown rapidly in recent years, highlighting the economic value of the natural assets of the North Coast and Glens.



Kayaking © Outdoor Recreation NI

## AQUACULTURE

Aquaculture is the farming of fish, shellfish and aquatic plants. Aquaculture has become increasingly important in both Larne and Belfast Loughs, dominated by blue mussel cultivation and to a much lesser extent Pacific oysters, which are cultivated on trestles in the intertidal zone. Manila clam cultivation is also licensed in Larne Lough. There is an organic salmon farm south of Red Bay which has a maximum number of 8 cages, containing a maximum of 50,000 fish per cage. The cages are rotated through the licensed site in order to ensure no long-term impacts on the seabed. Management of these sites and the water quality for these areas has become a priority to support this growing industry.



Pacific Oysters © Guido

## ENERGY

The areas around Belfast Lough, Larne Lough and Rathlin Island are currently being assessed for viable oil and gas reserves while at the same time there are potentially two tidal projects being developed off Torr Head.

THE LEGENDARY 'CLOTH OF GOLD' WAS MADE FROM THE LONG FINE BYSSUS THREADS OF FAN MUSSELS- WHICH MAY BE ORIGIN OF THE LEGEND OF THE 'GOLDEN FLEECE'

THE GIANT'S CAUSEWAY AND CAUSEWAY COAST IS THE ONLY GEOLOGICAL WORLD HERITAGE SITE IN THE UK AND IRELAND.

MAERL HAS BEEN EXTRACTED FOR CENTURIES MAINLY FOR USE AS FERTILISER AND IS POPULAR FOR ORGANIC GARDENING.

KELP WAS A RICH SOURCE OF IODINE AND SODA FOR GLASS AND SOAP MANUFACTURE ON RATHLIN ISLAND IN THE MID 19TH CENTURY UNTIL 1938.

SCALLOPS HAVE UP TO 100 EYES AROUND THE EDGE OF THEIR SHELL, ALLOWING THEM TO DETECT CHANGING PATTERNS OF LIGHT AND MOVEMENT.

FULMARS ARE ACTUALLY RELATED TO ALBATROSSES, EVEN THOUGH THEY LOOK LIKE GULLS. THEY CAN DEFEND THEIR NESTS BY SPITTING OUT A SMELLY OIL.



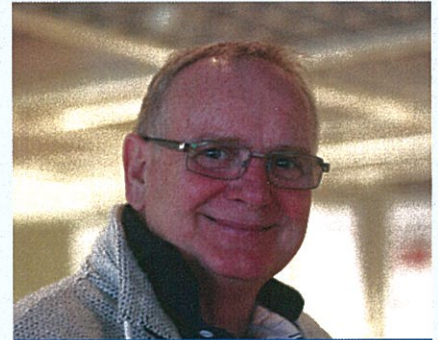
# ULSTER WILDLIFE'S VISION FOR OUR LOCAL SEAS

Ulster Wildlife has a vision - that sea life thrives from the depths of the ocean to our coastal shallows. Although the seas around Northern Ireland are full of amazing creatures, sadly there are not as many as there used to be. Thankfully, it is not too late to turn around this decline. Our seas and the life within them have a remarkable capacity to recover – but only if we give them the chance. If we act now, *Living Seas* are within our grasp.

Ulster Wildlife sees this as a marine decade, a real chance for us all to protect our local seas for now and for future generations.

Ulster Wildlife is working to –

- Inspire people about our local sea life and to value the sea for the many ways in which it supports our quality of life, through education and public events.
- Secure a network of marine protected areas as part of a long-term solution to the management of healthy seas.
- Ensure developments and activities in our seas are sustainable by influencing the marine planning process.
- Ensure our seas and sea life are properly protected through fit-for-purpose marine and fisheries legislation and practices.



**I'VE FOND MEMORIES AS A CHILD SWIMMING AT HAZELBANK PARK, WHITEABBEY, WHERE WE WOULD JUMP OFF PADDY'S ROCK INTO THE SEA. MORE RECENTLY IT'S BEEN A PLEASURE TO CYCLE INTO BELFAST AND CATCH A GLIMPSE OF THE CURLEWS, OYSTERCATCHERS AND SHELDUCKS ALONG THE WAY.**

Mark Winning, Jordanstown

## HOW YOU CAN HELP US ACHIEVE OUR VISION

- Support our campaigns and make your voice heard on important issues that affect our local seas.
- Get involved by volunteering with our Living Seas Team or coming along to one of our events.
- Take part in programmes that help survey our local sea life.
- Support the work of Ulster Wildlife by becoming a member, making a donation, or providing corporate sponsorship.

You'll find out more about our Living Seas work and the ways to get involved at [www.ulsterwildlife.org](http://www.ulsterwildlife.org)

## ULSTER WILDLIFE

Ulster Wildlife is your local wildlife charity. We've been champions of nature for over 35 years and are working hard to ensure that wildlife has a future in Northern Ireland. We work with local people to secure space for nature in our countryside, towns, coastlines and seas. Our work is guided by our two key themes of *Living Landscapes* and *Living Seas*.

Ulster Wildlife is one of 47 independent Wildlife Trusts across the UK. The Wildlife Trusts partnership is the largest UK voluntary movement dedicated to protecting the full range of our native habitats and species.

## CONTACT US

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part of  
The Wildlife Trusts



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Ulster Wildlife is the operating name of Ulster Wildlife Trust, a charity recognised by HM Revenue & Customs XN45269 and a company incorporated in NI limited by guarantee NI 12711.

Cover Image:  
Torr Head © I Kaleda

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