



# OUR LIVING SEAS COUNTY DERRY/ LONDONDERRY



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



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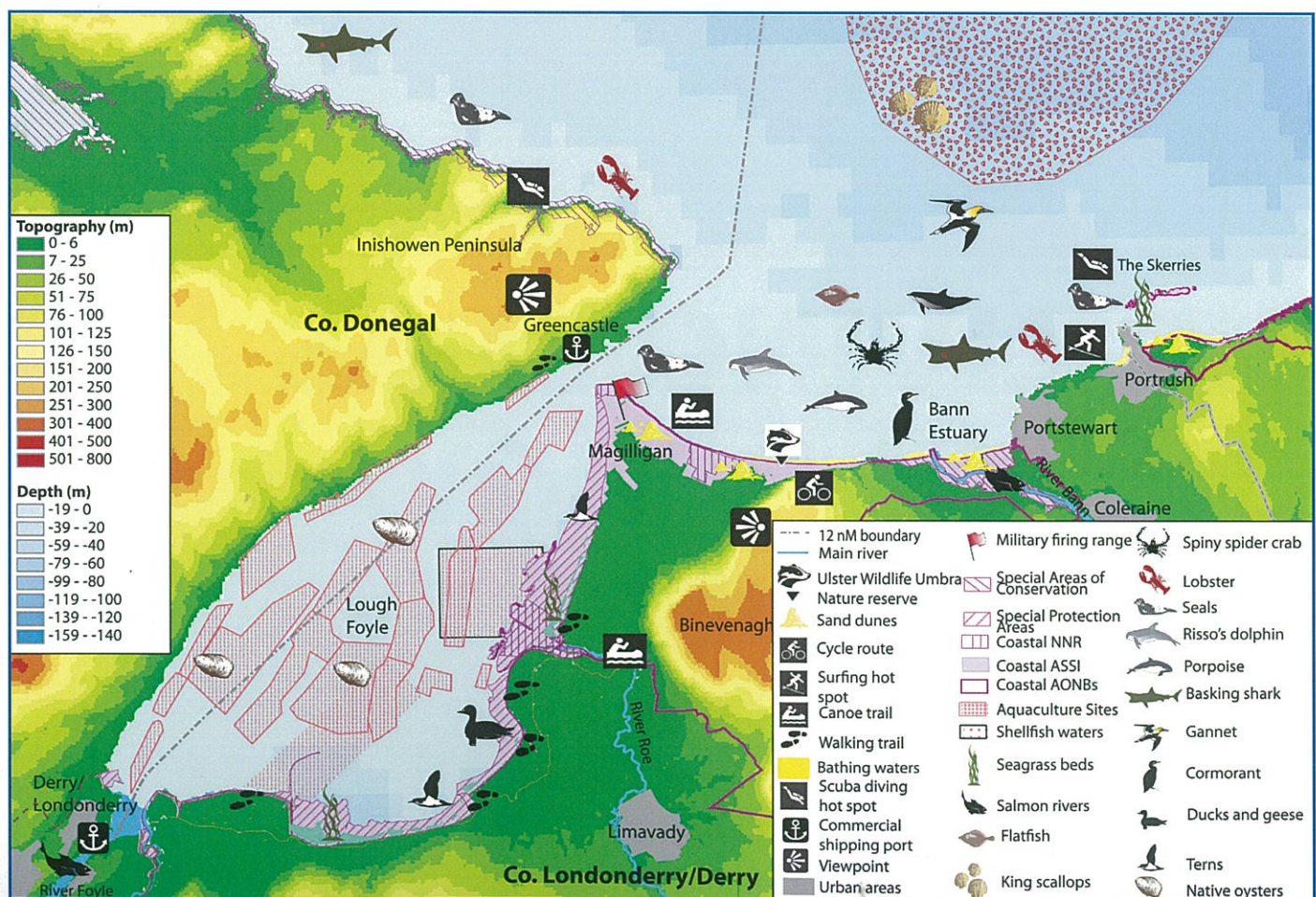
*Living Seas* is Ulster Wildlife's vision for the future of Northern Ireland's seas. Within *Living Seas*, wildlife thrives, from the depths of the ocean to the coastal shallows.

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.

County Derry/Londonderry has a wealth of marine heritage. Lough Foyle is home to Northern Ireland's largest native oyster beds, as well as being a hotspot for migrating birds such as the whooper swan and pale-bellied brent goose. The north coast is one of the best places in the UK to spot dolphins, porpoises, whales and basking sharks.

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

## Map of some of the wildlife hotspots and activities around the County Derry/ Londonderry Coast





# IMPORTANT MARINE HABITATS FOUND AROUND THE COASTLINE OF COUNTY DERRY/LONDONDERRY



Brent Goose © C Cassidy



Ross Coral © J Jones



Dunes at Binevenagh and Magilligan © M Hartwell

## MUDDY AREAS

Like many estuaries, Lough Foyle's seafloor is mostly mud and fine sand which form vast wetlands ideal for wildfowl and waders, including the pale-bellied brent goose and bar-tailed godwit. Average winter duck and geese populations exceed 25,000 birds.

Native oysters (*Ostrea edulis*) and blue mussels (*Mytilus edulis*) also form biogenic (living) reefs, which support a rich diversity of creatures by providing a hard surface for animals to attach to and live on.

Much of the rocky shore areas and the surrounding salt marsh are formally designated as Areas of Special Scientific Interest and Special Protected Areas as well as an internationally important RAMSAR site for protecting the birds.

## REEFS

The open coast is fringed along much of its length by basalt rocky reefs. Shallow reefs are dominated by kelp forests that are home to fish such as brightly coloured wrasse, shimmering red seaweeds, and a multitude of anemones, cup corals, soft corals and sea mosses.

Deeper under the waves off the coast of Co. Derry/Londonderry, the rocks are carpeted with colourful creatures including sponges, sea ferns (hydroids), bryozoans, such as the beautiful ross coral (pictured), sea squirts and anemones, such as the fried egg anemone. The Skerries and Causeway Special Area of Conservation, off the coast of County Derry/Londonderry and County Antrim at Portrush, provides protection to many species of national and international importance.

## DUNES

The sand dune systems at the Bann Estuary and Magilligan are recognised for their European importance and are designated Areas of Special Scientific Interest and Special Areas of Conservation.

These dune systems are important for many rare animals and plants such as moths, butterflies and orchids including the small eggar moth and marsh helleborine orchid.

They are also used as an important educational site for students and scientists to learn about dune formation and our constantly changing coastline.



# IMPORTANT MARINE SPECIES FOUND OFF THE CO. DERRY/LONDONDERRY COASTLINE



Basking Shark © JP Trenque



Native Oyster © B Picton



Spiny Spider Crab © MarLIN

## NATIVE OYSTER

The native oyster (*Ostrea edulis*) was once common, however numbers crashed in the late 19th century. All native oysters start out as males, and throughout their lives change back and forth from male to female. A single female oyster can produce two million eggs. They are threatened by increased sedimentation or erosion of muds and fine sand where they like to live, temperature changes and parasites such as *Bonamia*. Native oyster numbers are also threatened by the invasive Pacific oyster (*Crassostrea gigas*), which for years have been cultivated on the shore but are now known to spawn and settle in the same seabed sites as the native oyster. Native oysters have rounder shells with smoother edges, while their Pacific relatives have a more elongated shell with deeply grooved edges.

## BASKING SHARK

Basking sharks (*Cetorhinus maximus*) are the second largest fish in the world (around 7m long!). These gentle giants pose no threat to humans as they eat tiny shrimp-like creatures which float in the sea (plankton). Basking sharks travel thousands of miles in their lifetimes. They visit our seas during the late spring and summer and are often seen off Portrush and Portstewart - high points on the north coast are also good viewing points. Little is known about basking shark reproduction, however, it is thought that their pregnancies last around 14 months and they have between two and six pups in each litter. Due to these low reproductive rates, basking shark populations are vulnerable and accidental damage from boats, fishing gear, as well as disturbance by humans may have devastating impacts upon their survival.

## SPINY SPIDER CRAB

Spiny spider crabs (*Maja brachydactyla*) are found on the reefs and the surrounding coarse, sandy areas off the coast during summer months. The spiny spider crab, whose body (excluding legs) can be over 20cm long, migrates to shallow coastal waters during the spring and summer to reproduce, before moving to deeper (>50m) waters in the autumn possibly to avoid the unpredictable and variable shallow water conditions caused by storms in winter. This species is currently rare around Northern Ireland, however an increase in numbers provides an important indicator of the impacts of climate change on our seas. It is a commercially fished species elsewhere (e.g. France, Spain, England) and may become a viable local fishery in the future.



# SPECIAL PLACES FOR WILDLIFE AROUND THE CO. DERRY/LONDONDERRY COASTLINE

## LOUGH FOYLE



Lough Foyle from Culmore © M Cosgrove, courtesy of Loughs Agency

Lough Foyle is the largest sea inlet in the UK and the River Foyle is tidal (the waters rise and fall by gravitational forces exerted by the moon and sun) along its whole length from the confluence of the Finn and Mourne to Culmore point where it joins Lough Foyle. Lough Foyle and the estuaries of the rivers Foyle, Faughan and Roe form a RAMSAR site, which means it has wetlands of international importance.

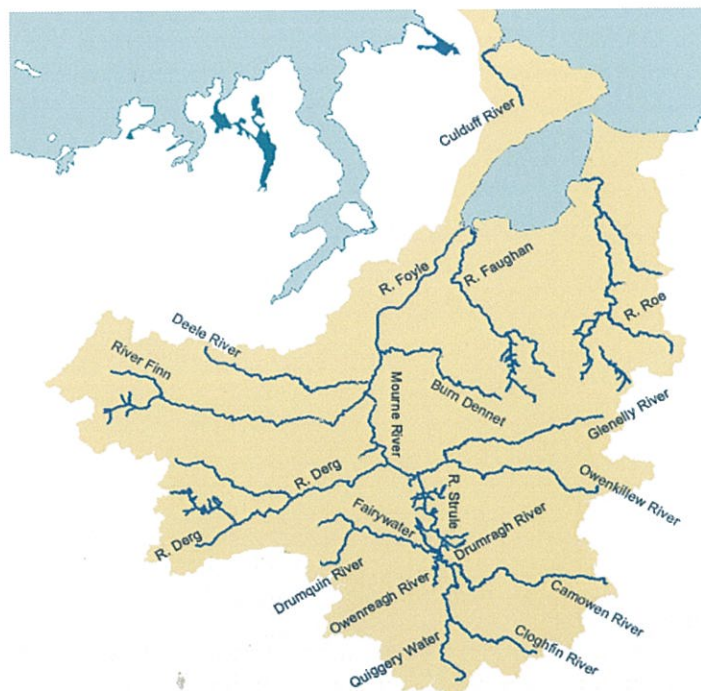


Salmon © Loughs Agency



Eider © A Lewis

The Loughs Agency manages Lough Foyle and its surrounding catchments (see map for areas in Loughs Agency's remit).



Some of the internationally important bird species which over-winter here include whooper swan, pale-bellied brent goose, and bar-tailed godwit, while birds of national importance include: red throated diver, shelduck, greenshank and common eiderduck.

There are also rare fish present which are listed as Irish Red Book species including: allis shad, twait shad, smelt and sea lamprey, as well as being the gateway for many Atlantic salmon returning to rivers to spawn.



# SPECIAL PLACES FOR WILDLIFE AROUND THE CO. DERRY/LONDONDERRY COASTLINE

## MAGILLIGAN DUNE SYSTEM



Magilligan Dunes and Beach at Umbra

Magilligan Dunes are one of the best examples of sand dune systems in the British Isles and are important for a wide range of specialist plants and invertebrates.



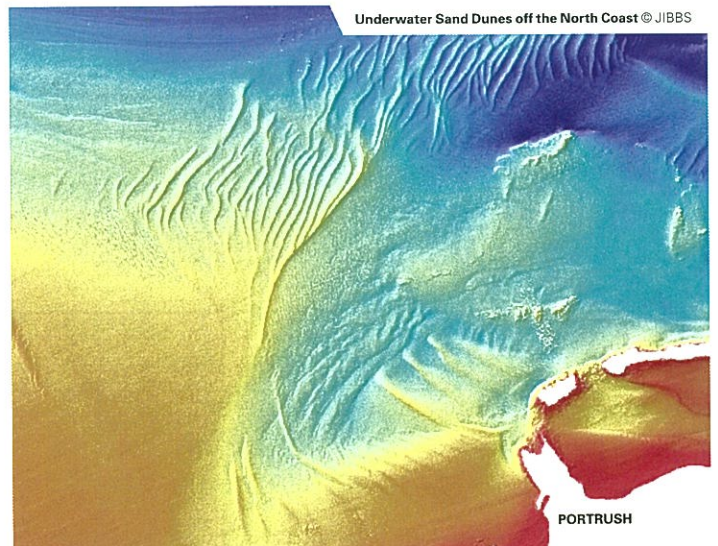
Marsh Helleborine © P Precey

Ulster Wildlife's Umbra Nature Reserve, near Benone, is part of the Magilligan system. Umbra is a relatively undisturbed area which consists of dune grasslands with an impressive display of flowering plants in the meadows and sand dunes, that support an incredible diversity of insect life. Approximately 45ha in size, the nature reserve is noted for a number of rare plants including the bee orchid, pyramidal orchid, fragrant orchid, frog orchid, and marsh helleborine. At least 250 species of moths have been recorded on this relatively small section of the dunes including the nationally rare small eggbar moth and scarce crimson & gold moth.



Scarce Crimson & Gold Moth at Umbra

The sand dunes seen on land are mirrored by sand ridges under the sea, in geological terms known as mega ripples, which form spectacular mobile sand waves of varying patterns. These undersea dunes are connected to the dunes we see on land. The undersea dunes pictured below are off the mouth of the Foyle and stretching to behind the Skerries on the seabed. At first glance these mobile sands may appear lifeless, however there may be many creatures here hiding such as the *Ciocalypa* sponge.



Underwater Sand Dunes off the North Coast © JIBBS



*Ciocalypa* Sponge © C Goodwin



# HOW WE USE THE COASTLINE AND SEAS AROUND CO. DERRY/LONDONDERRY

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. Derry/Londonderry.

## RENEWABLE ENERGY

Although there are currently no developments in this area there are zones identified for tidal, wind and wave energy offshore from the mouth of Lough Foyle and along the North Coast.

## LEISURE, RECREATION AND TOURISM

The north coast is renowned for its wide, sandy beaches, excellent surfing sites, majestic sand dunes and dramatic cliffs (Downhill and Binevenagh). These features make this area very important for the tourism and leisure industries, with excellent locations for hiking, kayaking, boating, coasteering, surfing, kite flying, paragliding and even hovercrafting. The North Coast sea kayak trail covers 80 miles of coastline, starting from Magilligan and working eastward. Sea angling is increasingly popular, with boat trips targeting species such as mackerel over the summer months, and species such as bass, pollock and flounder caught from the shore. Scuba diving is also a thriving recreational activity. An important connection between the beautiful Inishowen Peninsula in Donegal and the North Coast is made by the seasonal ferry that runs from Greencastle to Magilligan. Stunning viewpoints are located atop the cliffs of Binevenagh and on the high ground of the Inishowen Peninsula.



Surfing © Outdoor Recreation NI

## FISHING

The coastal waters around Co. Derry/Londonderry support an important fishing industry, with fishing ports located at Greencastle and Moville in Co. Donegal, which primarily target mussels and oysters. Pot fishing for crab and lobster is also important along the coastal fringe reef areas off Portstewart and Portrush, with a few boats based at the harbours of these two towns. Further offshore some scallop dredging occurs on the deeper coarse sand/gravel areas.



Fishing Boats in Donegal

## AQUACULTURE

Aquaculture is the farming of fish, shellfish and aquatic plants. Shellfish aquaculture has been carried out for over a century in Lough Foyle. In the last 20-30 years aquaculture has begun to grow markedly as an industry and now about 50% of Lough Foyle's seabed is covered by aquaculture sites, mainly for oysters and mussels, however not all of the sites are active.



Blue Mussels © P Naylor

**LOUGH FOYLE IS ONE OF THE BEST PLACES IN NI TO SEE THE WHOOPER SWAN. THE BIRDS ARRIVE IN MID AUTUMN FOLLOWING THEIR LONG AND ARDUOUS JOURNEYS FROM ICELAND.**

**THE TEMPERATURE OFF THE SKERRIES IS WARMER THAN OTHER PARTS OF NORTHERN IRELAND, AND SO IT IS THE ONLY PLACE MANY SOUTHERN SPECIES SUCH AS THE COTTON SPINNER SEA CUCUMBER (*HOLOTHURIA FORSKALI*) ARE FOUND.**

**HARBOUR PORPOISES ARE THE SMALLEST AND MOST COMMON CETACEAN (TYPE OF WHALE, DOLPHIN OR PORPOISE) FOUND IN OUR WATERS.**



# 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 LIKE BODYBOARDING IN THE WAVES AT DOWNHILL BEACH WITH MY DAD, CLIMBING ON THE ROCKS AT CASTLEROCK BEACH AND FINDING CRABS WITH MY FISHING NET"**

Sam Clements, Coleraine

## 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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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.

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Benone © I Kaleda

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