



OUR LIVING SEAS COUNTY DOWN

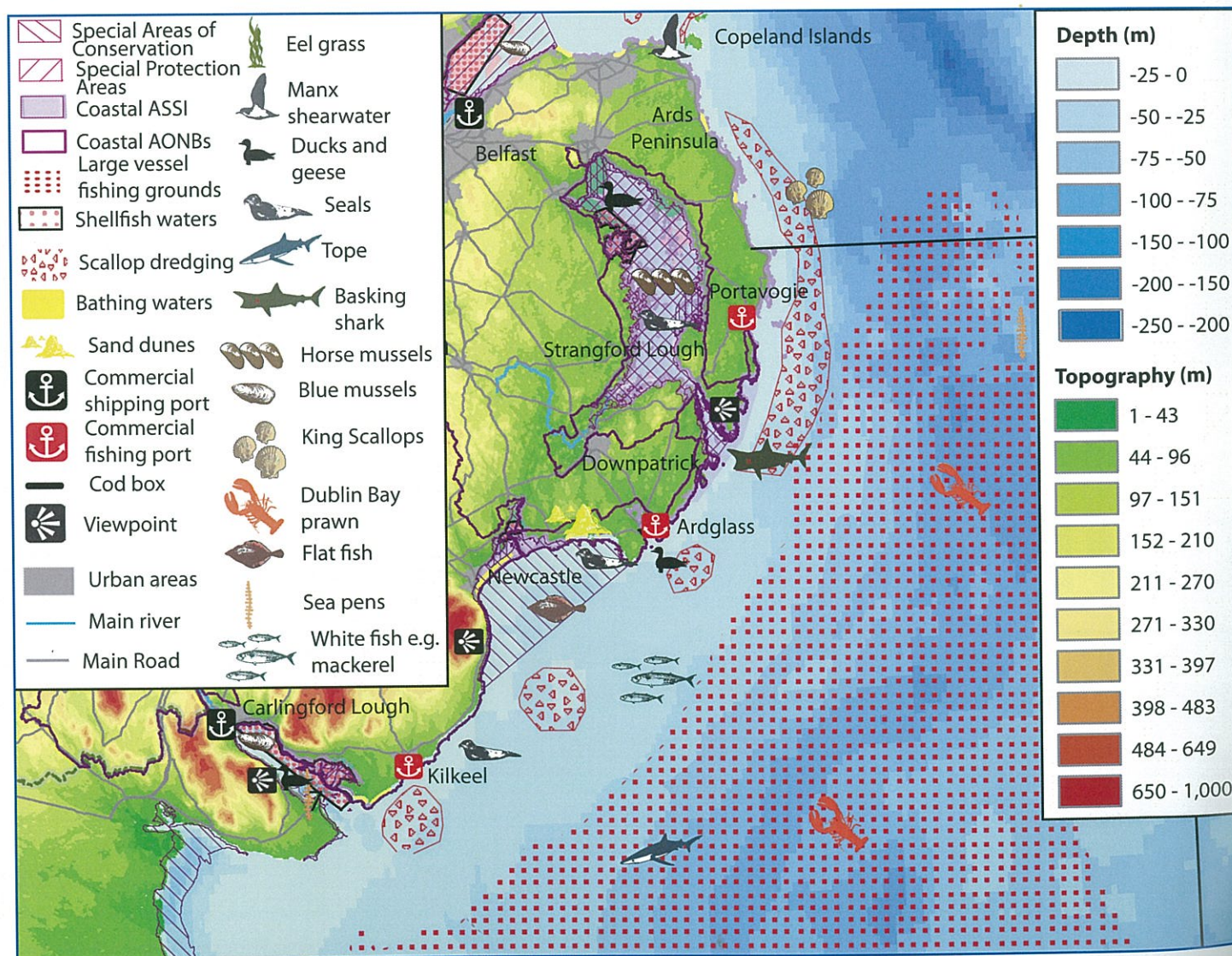
Living Seas is Ulster Wildlife's vision for the future of Northern Ireland's seas. Within *Living Seas*, wildlife thrives, from the depths of the ocean to the coastal shallows.

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 Down has long been famous for its marine heritage. Some of the key highlights include Strangford Lough with its internationally important, rich diversity of sea life and overwintering bird populations; the Copeland Islands, which harbour one of the few breeding populations of Manx shearwaters; Murlough / Dundrum Bay which has one of the best examples of subtidal sandbanks in the UK; and Carlingford Lough home to the beautiful yet vulnerable sea pens.

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

Map of some of the wildlife hotspots and activities around the County Down Coast



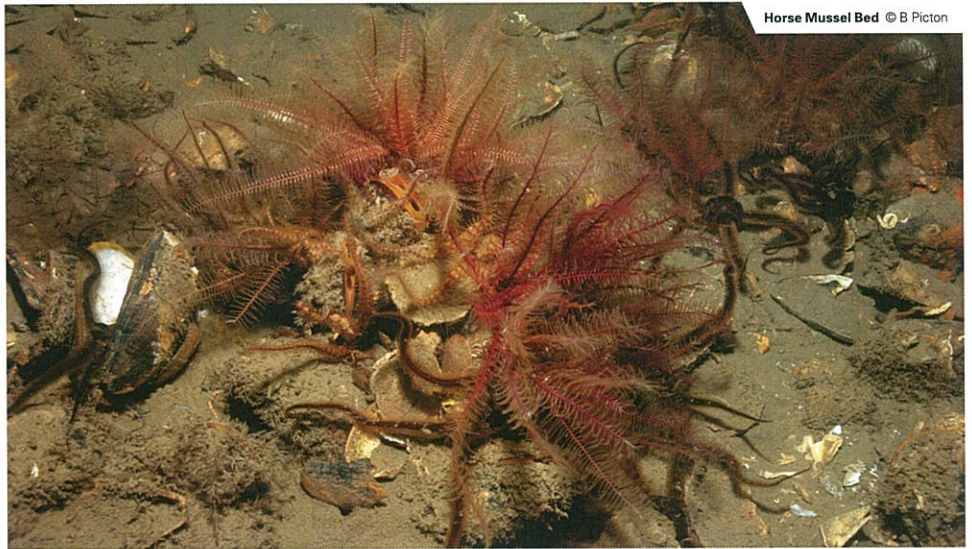
IMPORTANT MARINE HABITATS FOUND OFF THE CO. DOWN COASTLINE



Brent Geese © C Cassidy



Dublin Bay Prawn



Horse Mussel Bed © B Picton

SAND BANKS AND GRAVEL

The sand dunes of Murlough and Dundrum Bay continue underwater into the largest area of shallow sandbanks in Northern Ireland.

These provide a home for a wide range of shellfish and small creatures living within the sand, and are an important nursery ground for commercial fish species, especially flatfish and shellfish such as the Dublin Bay prawn (*pictured*). Some fisheries protection measures are in place to prevent disturbance of this habitat, such as a ban on dredging (including suction dredging) for razor shells (*Ensis sp.*) and trawling for cod.

The sand and gravel off Co. Down is of potential commercial interest for aggregate extraction for use in the construction industry.

MUDFLATS AND EELGRASS

Large areas of mud flats are found in Belfast, Strangford and Carlingford Loughs, as well as Killough Bay. The rich diversity of tiny creatures within the mud and the eelgrass (also called seagrass and *Zostera marina*) provide perfect meals for wading birds, such as the pale-bellied brent goose (*Branta bernicla hrota*). The brent geese feed here during late winter and spring before they fly to their summer feeding grounds in the Canadian Arctic. The international importance of these areas for overwintering birds (such as terns, great-crested grebes, and shelducks) is recognised through the designation as Ramsar sites and Special Protected Areas. The largest areas of eelgrass are found in the northern part of Strangford Lough, which has an extensive shoreline of fine sands and mud.

HORSE MUSSEL REEFS

Horse mussels (*Modiolus modiolus*) are large (up to 20cm shell length), brownish-coloured mussels. They are found off the Outer Ards coast and in Strangford Lough. Off the Outer Ards coast the horse mussels form reefs, which can be over 1m in height while in Strangford Lough, the mussels form 'clumps' on muddy, shelly sediments, which allow other marine life such as hydroids (sea ferns), sponges and sea squirts to live on them. Although the Outer Ards mussel community is more 'reef-like' there is more unique sea life living on the Strangford Lough clumps. Muddy *Modiolus* reefs are incredibly rare throughout the UK, with similar examples found only in Loch Sween, Scotland. The importance of this unique habitat was recognised in the designation of Marine Nature Reserve and European level Special Area of Conservation.

IMPORTANT MARINE SPECIES FOUND OFF THE CO. DOWN COASTLINE



Sea Pens © C Goodwin



Grey Seal © M Tressler



Dab © P Naylor

SLENDER SEA PENS

Sea pens (*Virgularia mirabilis*) are a type of soft coral. They can be up to 60cm tall; orange, beige or white in colour; they have a feather-like appearance; and form colonies.

They are found extensively in Carlingford Lough and further offshore in the western Irish Sea mud patch.

Sea pens are well adapted to life in muddy or fine sand seabeds; the lower part of the stem anchors the animal, while the branches bear the filter-feeding polyps. This species has stinging cells, so can catch both small creatures in the water, as well as

FLATFISH

Flatfish including plaice (*Pleuronectes platessa*), sole (*Solea solea*) and dab (*Limanda limanda*) are well adapted to sand and gravel seabeds, which are found extensively off County Down.

When newly hatched from the floating egg, tiny flatfish look like normal fish. As they develop their bodies prepare for the bottom-living life. One eye migrates over to join the other eye on the same side of the head, their body flattens, and some fish change colour to blend into the seabed. Plaice and sole are of commercial importance, and both spawning and nursery grounds are

SEALS

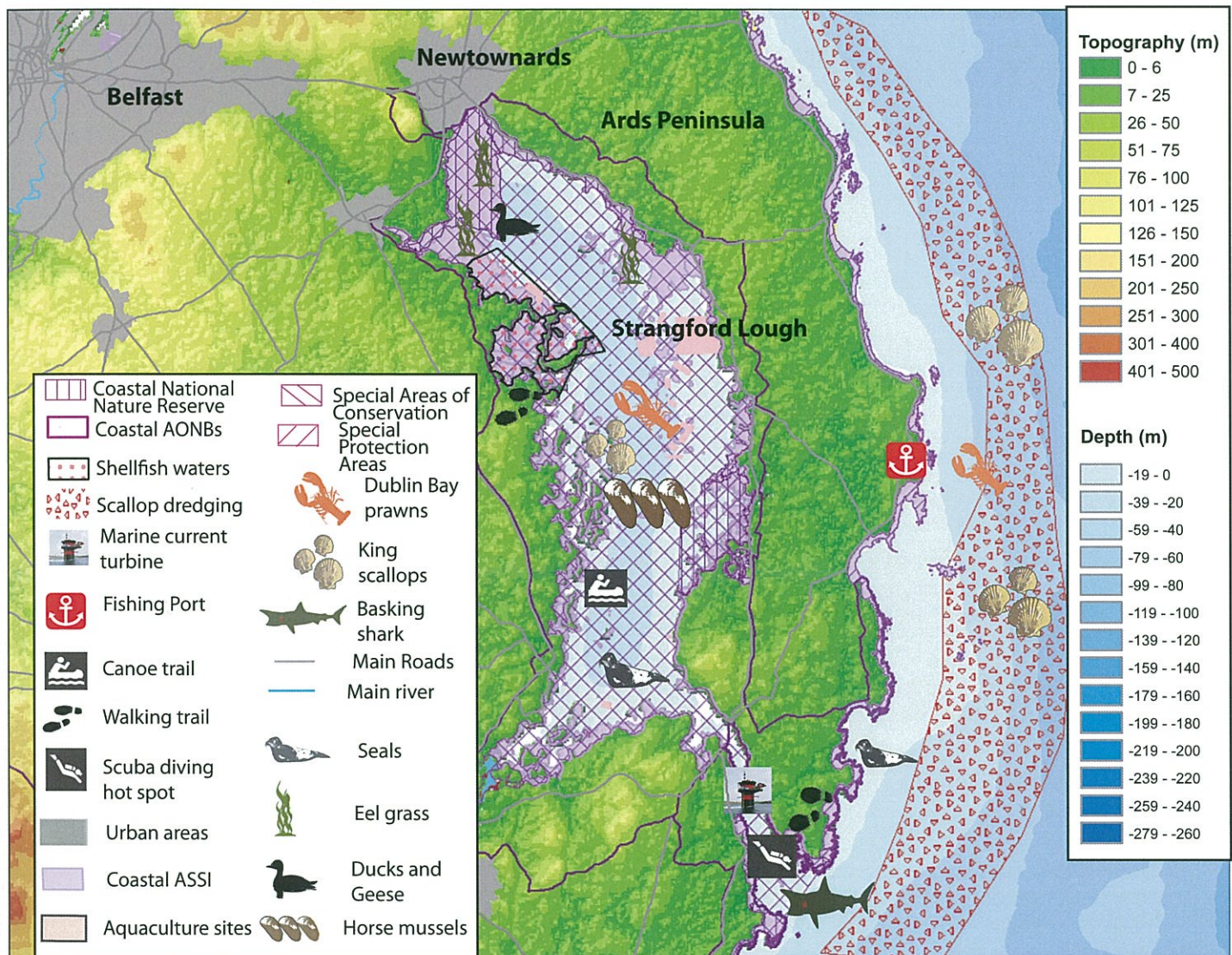
Seals have haul-out and breeding sites in Strangford Lough, and along the County Down coast, with the common seal listed as a feature in the designation of Strangford Lough and Murlough Special Areas of Conservation.

Two species of seal are found here, the grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*) and the common seal (*Phoca vitulina*). Grey seals are larger than common seals, have a distinctive 'Roman' nose and parallel nostrils while common seals have v-shaped nostrils and a labrador-like nose.

SPECIAL PLACES FOR SEA LIFE AROUND COUNTY DOWN

STRANGFORD LOUGH

Map of some of the wildlife hotspots and activities

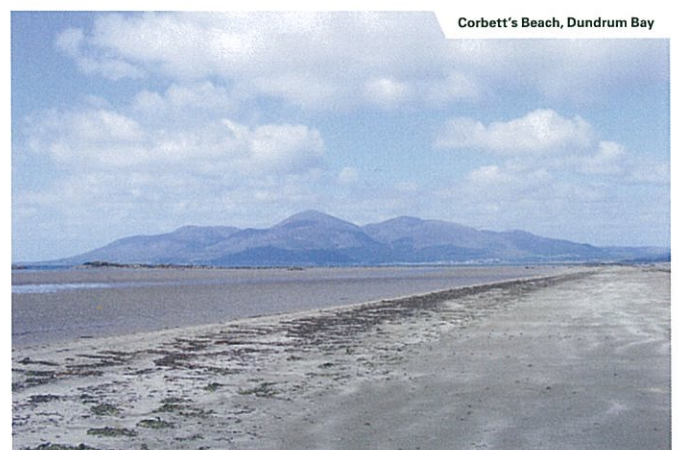


Strangford Lough is one of the most designated sites in Europe for nature conservation. Ulster Wildlife has been campaigning to make sure that the horse mussel reefs within Strangford Lough get the protection they need to recover from decline and are currently working with Government and other stakeholders to make sure the new *Modiolus* Restoration Plan stays on target and that a sustainable fishing plan for the Lough is implemented. Strangford Lough also has large eel grass beds which are very important for visiting birds.

SOUTH DOWN COAST

The South Down coastline has stunning sandy beaches and dunes such as those at Tyrella and Murlough. Dundrum Bay has some of the most important underwater sandbanks in Europe.

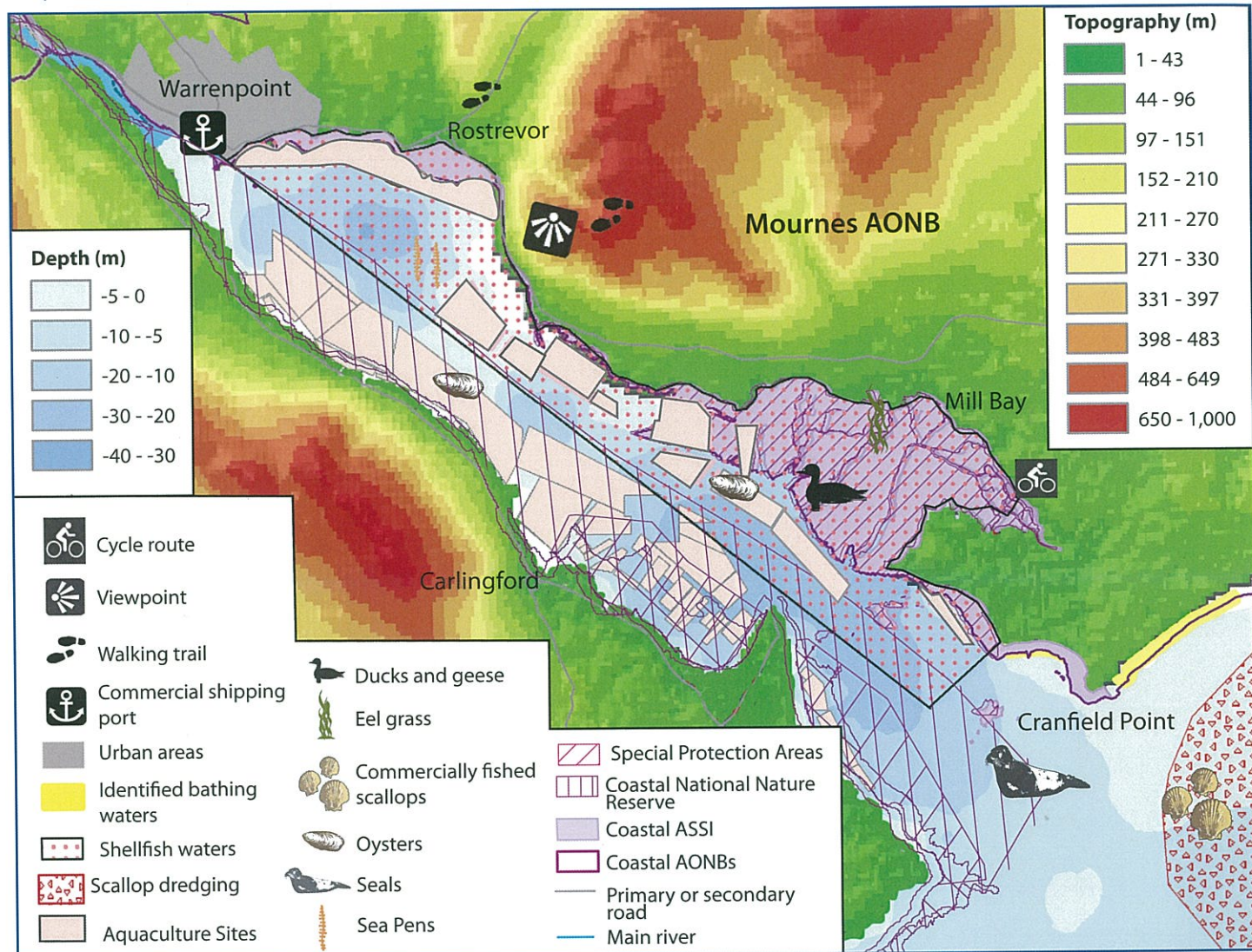
These provide a home for a wide range of shellfish and small creatures living within the sand, and have been found to be an important nursery ground for commercial fish species, especially flatfish. In turn, the shellfish are an important food source for the large wintering flocks of sea duck such as common scoter and smaller numbers of species such as long-tailed duck. The beaches are important feeding areas for waders such as oystercatcher, dunlin and ringed plover during winter and migration periods.



SPECIAL PLACES FOR SEA LIFE AROUND COUNTY DOWN

CARLINGFORD LOUGH

Map of some of the wildlife hotspots and activities



Carlingford Lough has important muddy habitats which support a wealth of life. As well as having extensive areas of sea pens, the lower beach at Cranfield Point is home to sea potatoes (a heart sea urchin called *Echinocardium cordatum*). The mudflats on the shore are an important feeding ground for a wide variety of wildfowl and wading birds, in particular pale-bellied brent goose, red shank and oystercatcher. The Mill Bay area also supports the largest intact saltmarsh remaining in Northern Ireland.

NORTH DOWN COAST

The coast stretching from Belfast to Bangor, and then along the Outer Ards Peninsula to the mouth of Strangford Lough is characterised by small sandy or pebbled bays and rugged rocky shores. Beautiful raised cobble beaches are found at Kearney and Ringboy Points.

The coast along this area is important for lobsters, crabs and other shellfish. The Copeland Islands, off Donaghadee, are home to one of the most important colonies of the seabird Manx shearwater in the British Isles. Manx shearwater spend most of their lives at sea and only come to land to breed and nest.



HOW WE USE THE COASTLINE AND SEAS AROUND CO. DOWN

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. Down.

FISHING

The major fishing ports in Northern Ireland are all located in Co. Down: Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel. Scampi (otherwise known as Dublin Bay prawn, langoustine, Norwegian lobster or in Latin *Nephrops norvegicus*) are the main catch. Potting takes place along the Ards Peninsula, South Down and in Strangford Lough, as does shore harvesting (e.g. for winkles and/or seaweeds).



Fishing boats, Co. Down

MARINE-BASED RENEWABLE ENERGY

The 'Seagen' turbine in the Narrows off Portaferry is the first successful installation using tidal technology in the UK, and at maximum capacity can produce enough electricity for 1,500 homes. There are two other potential renewable developments on the horizon, a tidal kite which is going through development trials in Strangford Lough just off Ballyhenry Bay and a potential 100 turbine offshore wind farm off the South Down coast.



Marine Current Turbine © Ardfern

AQUACULTURE

Aquaculture is the farming of fish, shellfish and aquatic plants. There are aquaculture sites in Belfast Lough, Strangford Lough, Killough Bay and Carlingford Lough, which include the cultivation of blue mussels, Pacific oysters, native oysters, Manila clams and king scallops.



King Scallop © P Naylor

RECREATION AND LEISURE

The marine environment provides a valuable tourism resource in this area. Recreation and leisure have increased markedly in the area over the past decade, although there is a long history of sailing and other water sports all around the Co. Down coast. Kayaking and jet-skiing have become popular, along with scuba diving, coastal hiking, coasteering and cycle route development.



Sailing at Ballydorn © A Bridge

STRANGFORD LOUGH REGULARLY SUPPORTS OVER 20,000 BREEDING WATERFOWL OVER WINTER.

AQUACULTURE SITES COVER OVER 22% OF CARLINGFORD LOUGH.

ACCORDING TO A STUDY IN 2004, THE ECONOMIC VALUE OF THE IRISH SEA IS AROUND £6 BILLION PER YEAR.

THERE HAS BEEN A FERRY AT STRANGFORD NARROWS SINCE AT LEAST 1180.

SEAGRASS IS THE ONLY FLOWERING PLANT THAT IS FOUND IN THE SEA.

THE NENDRUM TIDE MILL (AD 619) IS THOUGHT TO BE THE OLDEST KNOWN EXAMPLE OF TIDAL POWER IN THE WORLD.

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.



**"A CLEAR BLUE SKY.
A CALM, GENTLE SEA.
HE'S FOLLOWING ME.
SHINY HEAD, DRIPPING
WHISKERS, BRIGHT
EYES. WHAT CAN I DO
FOR YOU MR SEAL?"**

Poppy Goring, Newcastle

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

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:
Strangford Lough © M Hartwell

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