Funding secured for cetacean recording

By Simon Berrow

The IWDG has secured funding towards developing and expanding its cetacean recording schemes over the next three years. The Heritage Council and the Environment and Heritage Service in Northern Ireland have committed funding for the next three years (subject to annual budgets) and it is hoped Dúchas and the Marine Institute will soon collaborate too.

The objectives are to increase awareness of cetaceans in Irish waters and encourage greater participation in cetacean recording schemes. In order to increase participation, we will organise training workshops to improve cetacean identification and recording skills. Quantified-effort watches will be carried out at selected sites and the ferry surveys will be expanded to identify important sites for cetaceans. This will enable indices of abundance to be calculated. We also hope to utilise “platforms of opportunity” to increase seasonal and geographic coverage, especially off the northwest coast where coverage has traditionally been limited. The IWDG will use this funding to continue to maintain and improve the national cetacean database and develop indices for monitoring status. The opportunities for IWDG members and other interested parties to get actively involved in the conservation of cetaceans in Irish waters have never been greater and we encourage everybody to participate.

The IWDG would like to thank the Heritage Council and Northern Ireland Environment and Heritage Service for their commitment and we look forward to a new era of cetacean recording in Ireland.

Stranding Scheme

Until 1974, the Irish coast was included in the Stranded Whale Scheme co-ordinated by the Natural History Museum in London, which claims to be the longest-running stranding scheme in the world. The Irish Naturalists Journal published records of cetaceans from 1925. Dr Colm Ó Ríordáin in Ireland’s Natural History Museum in 1972 published a provisional list of cetacea stranded on the Irish coast. After this date, a small number of dedicated people recorded and published records in the INJ of stranded animals in their vicinity but geographical coverage was limited and the smaller, more common species such as harbour porpoise were not recorded.

Published stranding records from 1901-1995 were reviewed to assess whether these records could be used to assess the status of cetaceans in Irish waters. This review showed that there had been a rapid increase in the number of reported strandings, which was attributed to increased awareness and thus recording effort. This meant stranding records could not be used to assess the status of cetaceans around the Irish coast, but they were useful in identifying mass and unusual stranding events, such as those due to incidental capture, epizootics or changes in distribution associated with oceanographic changes. Stranded cetaceans provide an excellent opportunity to learn more about their ecology, such as diet, reproductive biology, growth rates and parasite burden when recovered for post-mortem examination.

Sighting Scheme

The IWDG has two sighting schemes, a casual and an effort-related scheme. Casual sightings are good for recording rare species and can identify areas for more intensive coverage. An effort-related scheme can provide indices of relative abundance showing seasonal and geographical changes in abundance. To date, the IWDG database has nearly 3,000 sighting records and 1,000 hours of effort-related watches. There are records of 17 species observed from all around the Irish coast and in all months. Since 1991, a total of 619 quantified-effort watches have been carried out from 36 sites in 10 counties. These have recently been published in The IWDG Cetacean Sightings Review (1991-2001).

• The Irish Whale & Dolphin Group (IWDG) is dedicated to the conservation and better understanding of cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoise) in Irish waters through study, education and interpretation
• REGISTERED CHARITY NO CHY11163
• WEBSITE www.iwdg.ie

Granuaile Sub-Aqua Club diving officer Kate Hills and her son Tristram cool down a stranded northern bottlenose whale in Killala, Co Mayo, 1999. Care is taken to avoid the whale’s blowhole.

*NEWSFLASH* On Sunday 17th November, IWDG observers watched with ease 5-7 fin whales blowing within five miles of the Old Head of Kinsale. With scopes, the fin whales could be seen feeding on the surface. About two miles east of this location, towards the Kinsale gas fields and about the same distance offshore, between 3-5 humpbacks were seen during a two-hour watch.
IWDG calls on Government for Marine Conservation Action Plan

Ireland’s marine environment needs a holistic marine conservation plan

The IWDG has called on the government to fulfil its commitment to protect the marine environment.

Dúchas, the state agency tasked with the conservation of Ireland’s flora and fauna, has had no marine biologists in its professional research staff for the last year, and yet it is statutorily obliged to manage and protect a marine natural resource worth over €1 billion per annum. With only one marine biologist currently on its staff, it is clearly unable to fulfill its national and international obligations.

Part of the difficulty in developing a marine conservation plan lies in determining which government department or agency is responsible for marine conservation. Dúchas (now under the Department of the Environment & Local Government), the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Marine Institute all have various responsibilities with respect to the marine environment.

Twenty-four species of cetacean have been recorded in Irish waters, and eleven are frequently observed, including the great whales - blue, fin, sei, humpback and sperm - the largest mammals on the planet. Many of these species are threatened in Irish waters by human activities such as oil and gas exploration, seismic surveys, industrial pollution and commercial fishing. To conserve whales and dolphins in Irish waters, we need a greater understanding of the species present and the threats they face.

In funding the energy and fishing industries, the EU and the government are subsidising activities which may damage Ireland’s marine environment. For example, the Petroleum Affairs Division, while claiming to protect the marine environment, has no marine environmental protocols in place to ensure environmental impact assessments (EIAs) are carried out before activities such as offshore exploratory drilling and seismic surveys are licenced. The state has a national and statutory responsibility to do this, but the relevant authorities - Dúchas and the marine department - have failed to seriously manage industrial development projects which will clearly impact on cetaceans and commercial fishing.

Ireland’s Common Fisheries Policy Review Group is currently calling for a study of the impact of marine mammals on the fishing industry - as if marine mammals were responsible for overfishing! If oil companies and fish farmers are required to carry out EIAs, why are private fishing industry companies exempt from similar assessments of current fishing activities? Such an approach might help to prevent overfishing in Irish waters and the destruction of the fishing industry.

The government are spending over €27 million on a national seabed mapping survey to develop the commercial potential of Ireland’s marine resources, but has also given a commitment to manage the marine environment in a sustainable manner. It is time for the government to invest in a marine conservation plan for marine waters, and to develop a holistic management approach with respect to cetaceans and other marine species.

The Irish Whale and Dolphin Group looks forward to continuing to assist the government in developing a holistic marine conservation plan for Irish waters.

Letter from the Secretary

By Pádraig Whooley

On behalf of the IWDG committee, I would like to wish all of you a merry Christmas and a peaceful 2003. It has been a good year for the group, with an increase in membership from 400 to 500. While appreciating that in this uncertain economic climate there are increasing demands on your cash, we hope you feel that your membership is well spent. The more members and support we have, the more we can achieve. We would also like to acknowledge the support of our sponsors: the Heritage Council, the Northern Ireland Environment and Heritage Service, P&O Ferries, Irish Ferries and Patagonia.

We hope you can continue to support our work by renewing your membership. Some of you may be wondering why you did not receive a membership renewal form with your newsletter. The IWDG are a generous lot, and if you joined us after 1st June 2002 we gave you free membership from June to December; so you will not receive a membership renewal notice from us until December 2003. Feel free to post us a donation in lieu of these months, if you wish. Or why not purchase our special gift offer of IWDG membership & pack for a family member or friend?

There are lots of IWDG activities planned for 2003 and we hope you will participate in them. Some of last year’s whale-watching courses were cancelled due to lack of interest among members. We have three weekends on Cape Clear planned for next summer (see insert), so why not come along? We will also be running WhaleWatch Ireland 2003 on 3rd August at nine locations around the coast, each of which will need people like you to help run on the day. So please support the events into which we put so much energy for you, our members.

Please contact me if you have any queries relating to IWDG events: IWDG Secretary, Pádraig Whooley, “Sunny Brook,” Brookhill House, Courtmacsherry, Co Cork. Tel: (023) 46844 Email: padraigwhooley@eircom.net

Whale radar under test

A life-saving “whale radar” is to be tested in a busy sea lane in the Canary Islands where up to 10 sperm whales are killed by ship collisions each year. The system uses sophisticated acoustic buoys to spot whales and warn ship captains of their position. The aim is to create a safety corridor for endangered sperm whales by placing 12 acoustic buoys along the 120km sea highway stretching between the Spanish islands of Tenerife and Gran Canaria. French biologist Michel André, who devised the Whale Anti-Collision System, recently won a Rolex Enterprise Award for his work.

Carrigaholt dolphin-watching vessel Draiocht on the Shannon estuary. In 2000, Shannon dolphin-watching was estimated to be worth €400,000-816,000
Europe questions Government on Corrib gas project

By Shay Fennelly

Following a complaint by IWDG, the Environment Directorate (DG XI) of the European Commission sent a letter of enquiry to the government in October 2002 about the development of the Corrib gas field.

DGXI is responsible for implementing EU environment law. The Commission is seeking information on:

- the Irish authorities' assessment procedures;
- the safeguarding of Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for wild birds and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) for protected habitats and marine priority species (harbour porpoise and bottlenose dolphin);
- details of the reasons from decision-making bodies for the approved discharge location and future pipeline discharges from the proposed terminal; treatment and discharges of wastewater arising during the construction of the terminal; and the risk of groundwater and other water pollution arising from the terminal.

The Department for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources has been asked to comment on deficiencies in the Irish regulatory framework for offshore oil and gas exploration. It has also been asked to provide details of how wastes generated from offshore oil and gas exploration are regulated for the Corrib development and relate to Directive 75/442/EEC on waste.

In relation to whales and dolphins, the government have been asked for a response to claims that seismic surveys and exploratory, appraisal drilling were conducted by EEl since 1996 without environmental impact survey or regulation. It has also been asked to:

- explain what steps were taken under the Habitats Directive, Article 12, to protect whales and dolphins from disturbance caused by seismic surveys, exploratory drilling and blasting in Broadhaven Bay;
- to comment on claims that:
  - the information provided by the developer within the EIS was deficient with regard to protected wild bird sites;
  - there has been a lack of baseline survey work;
  - further investigations have been inappropriately deferred to the post-approval stage.

The Commission wishes to know how each relevant decision-making body with responsibility for ensuring compliance with the Habitats Directive performed with regard to relevant sections of the Corrib development. It is also looking for comments on how the “in combination” effects have been addressed by the different decision-making authorities and why the Environmental Protection Agency Act 1992 appears to inappropriately constrain the role of planning authorities with regard to decision-making on impacts affecting Natura 2000 sites (SACs and SPAs). They also ask for details of the considerations given by the decision-making authorities on alternative terminal sites, given the significant risks to Natura 2000 sites in north Mayo. The government has two months to respond to the Commission.

Study to assess risks to mammals, seabirds off south coast

By Oliver Kiely

The marine mammal and seabird populations off southwestern Ireland represent an important natural resource. Their ecological position, however, also confers on marine mammals and seabirds a unique competitive role with humans for key marine resources. The RAMSSi [Risk Assessment for Marine Mammal & Seabird Populations in Southwestern Irish Waters] project is a two-year research project funded by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and carried out by the marine mammal & seabird group of the Coastal & Marine Resources Centre (CMRC), University College Cork. Research will investigate the current status of marine mammal and seabird populations in the waters of southwest Ireland.

In conjunction with Duchas, The Heritage Service, the research team intends to combine dedicated, at-sea assessments with data gathered from key terrestrial colonies in the region. The project will also evaluate the sensitivity and vulnerability of seabird and marine mammal populations to existing and potential human impacts. Field and desktop studies will lead to the formulation of a GIS-based management tool for the region within an existing GIS framework for the region. The end result will be an accurate assessment of the population status on land and at sea of key species, with critical habitats and seasons identified for the purposes of effective marine coastal zone management and emergency planning.

For further information contact Oliver O Cadhla, o.ocadhla@ucc.ie, Mick Mackey, m.mackey@ucc.ie, Michelle Cronin, michele.cronin@ucc.ie, or telephone us at: (021) 490 4287/4288.

Send your letters, contributions or comments on the magazine to:
The Editor, IWDG News, 8 Grozzo Place, Booterstown, Co Dublin.

WINTER 2002 IWDG News
Cape Clear to Cape Verdes

The IWDG heads off in search of the wintering quarters of Ireland's humpback whales

When a fiddler from the Blaskets heard eerie sounds from the sea through the thin skin of his curragh, he took up his bow and imitated what he thought was fairy music. And so the famous tune, Port na bPúcaí, came to be. To some of us, the music sounds uncannily like the song of the humpback whale. Years ago, humpback whales may have been quite common off the Irish coast and their song may have been a familiar sound to coastal and island communities.

Sightings of humpback whales in Irish waters, though still rare, are on the increase. Between 1992 and 1998, nine sightings were reported to the IWDG, but in the last two years we have had 14 sightings, mainly off the southwest coast. This increase in reported sightings is undoubtedly due to increased observer interest, but fortunately, in the last 12 months, we have been able to photograph some of the whales.

Animals we know

Using photo-identification, individual humpbacks can be positively identified by the unique pattern on the underside of their tail fluke. This summer, we photographed a humpback whale and, through matching tail-fluke photographs, confirmed that the same animal had been present in almost the same location the previous year. This means the same humpback whales may be returning to the Irish coast each summer - but where do they go when they leave our waters?

Where do they go?

In the North Atlantic, there are thought to be at least two breeding stocks of humpbacks. Most humpbacks photographed off Iceland and Greenland in the Arctic summer breed in shallow lagoons in the Caribbean. Not all of those heading south, however, arrive in the Caribbean - so where do they go?

A small breeding population of humpback whales has been photographed around the Cape Verde Islands, off West Africa. However, the feeding grounds of these whales have not been located. Perhaps the humpback whales that occur in Irish waters are part of this small population, still seriously depleted after years of commercial over-exploitation?

The search is on

The Irish Whale and Dolphin Group has organised an expedition to try and determine the breeding grounds of Irish humpback whales. We intend to sail along their migration route from Ireland to the Canaries and south to the Cape Verde Islands in an attempt to track these whales from Cape Clear to Cape Verde. We also intend to try and obtain genetic samples of these whales to compare with breeding populations elsewhere in the world, and to record their calls to determine whether they still sing Irish songs on their breeding grounds?

Satellite tracking

A film documentary will be made of the expedition, and we intend to provide regular satellite links with the research vessel to enable tracking of the cruise on-line through a dedicated website. Thus the public, and especially schoolchildren, can follow our progress.

Setting sail

The Irish Humpback Whale Expedition is being carried out in collaboration with Joe Aston of Saoirse Sea Sports Ltd and Tony Whelan of Ergo Films. The 45-foot schooner Anna M sailed from Baltimore to Portugal in November 2002 and will sail to the Cape Verde Islands via the Canary Islands in February 2003. The team aims to be in the Cape Verde Islands for March and April 2003, to locate, photograph and record humpback whales there before the long journey home.

Sponsorship

The IWDG has been awarded sponsorship for this expedition by the Karl Mayer Foundation in Liechtenstein, but we need additional funding and support. As a registered charity, all donations made to the IWDG are tax-deductible.

More information

> For more information and the planned expedition route visit http://www.iwdg.ie/articles.asp?art=507&cat=15 or contact joe@gannetsway.com or Simon.Berrow@iwdg.ie for a breakdown of the expedition costs and logistics.
Marine Institute's 10th anniversary

Different perspectives on Ireland's marine resources marked the Marine Institute's 10th anniversary conference. Over 350 people attended the three-day conference in Dublin Castle in November. The purpose of the conference was to review marine research and development, assess progress and identify priorities and opportunities for the next five years.

Over the three days, expert presentations were made in twelve sessions on the role of marine research, fisheries, energy from the ocean, global climate change, the marine environment and biodiversity, salmon, biotechnology, the National Seabed Survey, shipping, aquaculture and marine tourism. Commander Mark Mellet of the Irish Naval Service posed the question: "What is our long-term national interest with regard to developing our marine resources, and is there a need for public policy to reflect that?"

- The Marine Institute will publish the proceedings of the 10th anniversary conference in early 2003. For a copy, contact Lisa Fitzpatrick at (01) 730 400

IWDG cetacean ferry surveys

By Dave Wall

As 2002 comes to a close, we have completed five monthly surveys on the Cherbourg route aboard the P&O ferries European Diplomat and European Ambassador.

The new Dublin-Cherbourg route has given us a golden opportunity to survey the Dublin, Wicklow and Wexford coasts as well as the Celtic Sea and English Channel. Already, we are beginning to notice areas of higher cetacean activity, with the hotspots roughly located midway across the mouth of the Bristol Channel and around Land's End/Lizard Point. So far, four cetacean species have been positively recorded on the Cherbourg surveys, with a large baleen whale also sighted. The most common sightings have been of harbour porpoise and common dolphins.

On the Irish Sea, we have started a new survey from Dublin to Holyhead on board the Irish Ferries vessel Ulysses, which is being co-ordinated by Nick Channon. Already, we've had sightings of common dolphins and harbour porpoise on this route.

We plan to publish a year-end report with maps of our sightings on our website www.iwdg.ie/FerrySurveys, and will continue the surveys on these routes during 2003 with the aim of building on our knowledge of cetacean activity in the Irish Sea, Celtic Sea and English Channel.

- We'd like to thank all the voluntary surveyors, the captains and crew of our survey vessels for their friendliness and assistance, and Sharon Turner of P&O and Ruth Moloney of Irish Ferries, for their help and support in organising these surveys. Finally, thanks to P&O Irish Sea Ferries and Irish Ferries for sponsoring our surveys.

Request for sponsors

The IWDG Ferry Surveys Project is looking for a commercial sponsor to fund purchase of equipment and cover survey costs. The project is already generously sponsored by P&O Irish Sea and Irish Ferries who provide free passage for their friends and assistance, and Sharon Turner of P&O and Ruth Moloney of Irish Ferries, for their help and support in organising these surveys. Finally, thanks to P&O Irish Sea Ferries and Irish Ferries for sponsoring our surveys.

Marine Institute supports underwater acoustics training

Scientist and IWDG committee member Faith Wilson attended, on behalf of the IWDGs, an underwater acoustic course run by Dr John Goodil of Seiche.com and hosted by the Imperial College in London in September. The course was aimed at developing clear quantitative scientific understanding of the issues involved in the impact of high-power acoustics on marine wildlife. The course reviewed the way in which marine wildlife may be affected by high-power sound. The use of acoustics in devising effective monitoring and disturbance avoidance strategies for marine mammal populations was also discussed. The course fee was sponsored by the Marine Institute.

- Visit their website http://www.marine.ie

Sightings of cetaceans on Rosslare/Dublin-Cherbourg route in 2002

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Casa air-crew from Maritime 101 Squadron, Irish Air Corps, carry out fisheries, oil pollution surveillance and sometimes log whales for IWDG

Oil pollution & cetaceans

By Kevin McCormack

Due to the distinct lack of baseline data, very little is known of the effect of heavy metals, PCBs and other organochlorines, as well as chronic oil pollution, on cetaceans. A workshop in Bergen in 1995 identified the effects as follows:

Direct Effects (lethal or sub-lethal):

- increased susceptibility to disease;
- impairment of reproduction and early development;
- immune suppression;
- cancer induction and mutagenic effects;
- changes in behaviour;
- occurrence and extent of epizootics;
- thermoregulation imbalance;
- increased metabolism.

Indirect Effects:

- indirect effects include:
- displacement to find clean water;
- displacement due to reduction in prey due to contamination and impairment of responses;
- increased vulnerability to predators.

Cetaceans are highly vulnerable to pollution-inflicted diseases, pollutants, toxins and heavy metals which are increasingly blamed for mass strandings, immune system deficiencies and birth defects. In this role as early ecological indicators of pollution, they serve to warn us of the state of our seas, and, ironically, the health of humanity is reliant upon a functioning ecosystem.

As emphasised by Dr Sylvia Earle (former Chief Scientist, NOAA): "Every breath we take is dependent on the ocean, and unless we really understand how that vast system works and take better care of it, it isn't just the ocean that's in jeopardy, it's our whole future that's at stake.

With the sinking of the Prestige oil tanker off the Spanish coast at time of going to press, the true impacts of this type of environmental disaster on wildlife will only unfold over the coming months.
The advantage of maintaining 'cliff time' at a constant location throughout the year is that with sufficient effort, and over time, seasonal trends become apparent.

Whale activity, like everything else in the natural world, is punctuated with highs and lows, and so the fruits of our whale-watching reflect this. Thankfully, there seem to be more highs than lows for those with the inclination to sit and watch.

The large baleen whale season came to an end for me on 24th December 2001 with a wonderful encounter of the same humpback mother-and-calf pair I had observed amongst fin whales on several occasions earlier in the week from the Old Head of Kinsale, Co Cork.

Daily sightings from sea-watchers in the area suggested that encounters remained superb the following week, running up to New Year's Eve. However, the 'big blubber' activity fell off dramatically in January 2002.

So, lest you think that whale-watching in Cork is akin to shooting fish in a barrel.... well, it's not. I had to wait and watch until July 2002 before I saw my next whale off the Old Head. Yes, seven months, and all for a singularly unspectacular glimpse of a distant minke whale. But such is the local seasonal variation I've come to expect. For the third year running, the highs of November and December were followed by a gradual reduction in activity across the cetacean spectrum through January and February, though sightings could still be excellent - with common dolphins frequently seen aggregating in big numbers and almost 100% encounter rates of harbour porpoises.

The 'low season' on the south coast is without doubt spring/early summer, extending to mid-June, although I refer to a 'low season' with caution, as it is all relative. When compared with other locations, the Old Head even at its quietest hardly fails to impress. Over the last three years, it has still produced cetaceans on almost 60% of watches during this off-season.

Between 1999-2001, the end of the low season was always heralded by the arrival of a large group of 15-20 fin whales around the third week of June, their vapour plumes visible for miles on calm, clear days from vantage points along the 30 miles of Cork coastline between Roches Point and Galley Head. But 2002 seemed to buck the trend, as I had to sit through twelve watches at the Old Head over the next three months before seeing my first fin-whale blows peppering the horizon in late September, some three months later than normal.

Of course, early summer 2002 was a non-event, as relentless Atlantic storms waited in line to vent their spleen on those of us craving calm seas. The result was a reduction in my watch effort from previous years. The advantage, however, of building up a good local network is that one person missing activity should not matter, as someone else along the coast is likely to pick up the slack. But nobody saw large whales off Cork till September, and so we're confident that the arrival of the fin whales was delayed by about three months, though we don't know why.

I've spoken to researchers and fishermen alike, it seems that 2002 has been a very different year in terms of water temperature, weather fronts and fish-spawning activity; and, of course, 2002 has seen the return of El Nino.

I suspect the reason for the late arrival of the fin whales and the lower encounter rates this year may well be due to one or a combination of these factors. At time of writing (early November), I've seen large baleen whales (excluding minkes) on only three of 17 (18%) watches from the Old Head since 1st August 2002. This encounter rate is well down on the same period last year, when I recorded large baleen whales on five of seven (71%) watches from the same site.

Magical encounters

I'm not complaining, as we have had some magical encounters so far...
Humpback surfaces to breath

this autumn. On a rip-off from Tim Feen of large whales seen blowing from his Ardfield farm on 24th August, Simon Berrow, and I joined Colin Barnes the next day on his whale-watching boat out of Castlehaven, to see if they could be identified and photographed. We were in for a treat, as the trip proved yet again that our waters off the south coast have a richness and diversity of cetacean fauna that is potentially second to none.

During the morning trip, we enjoyed several common dolphin encounters, with a feeding frenzy comprising some 75-100 dolphins. But this wonderful spectacle paled in comparison to when a medium-sized whale surfaced off our port side. As we approached, its low bushy blow and absence of all obvious dorsal fin revealed that it was in fact a humpback whale (Megaptera novaeangliae). Moments later, it was joined by another.

Dolphins

Over the years, it has become very apparent just how much the common dolphin dominates sightings along the south coast. Over the period of my observations on the Old Head, of the 46 encounters in which I could identify dolphins with 100% confidence, 43 were of common dolphins (94%) while the remaining three comprised two bottlenose dolphins (4%) and one Bisc's dolphin (2%).

The above goes some way towards explaining why the memory of a more recent pelagic in west Cork on 23rd October will remain with me for a long time. The journey out from Castlehaven was uneventful, with no cetaceans seen in two hours. We finally approached an area thick with feeding gannets and dolphins and slowed down to investigate. Initially, I was unsure what species we were looking at, as there was much in the profile that was different to that of the usual suspects. I was side-tracked when common dolphins joined us for a bow-ride, yet remained curious about the others that kept a cautious distance.

New species

Their very tall, black, falcate dorsal fin started to reveal equally dark backs, short beaks on a sloping forehead and a striking yellow patch along the side of their tail-stock. Then a breach clinched it. I had just seen my first Atlantic white-sided dolphins (Lagenorhynchus acutus), a larger pelagic species, generally found offshore along our western seaboard. In birders parlance, a tick - bringing my Irish species tally to nine.

The next frustrating hour was spent attempting to photograph unco-operative dolphins in a choppy sea while being tossed about in a small boat, but at this stage I was prepared to settle for a record shot and leave the classic dolphin pose for another day.

Some thirty minutes later, the mixed group of common and Atlantic white-sided dolphins started settling into a relaxed mode, when I was drawn to a tight group of about five dolphins charging into the fray with gusto. I looked up at Colin who had seen them from the wheelhouse and we simultaneously yelled... "striped dolphins!" There was no questioning their identification, as I've seen this species, Stenella coeruleoalba, on several occasions in the Mediterranean, yet never positively identified them in Irish waters. An incredible three dolphin species in one group, one of which was a first for me. Does whale-watching get any better, I ask? Probably... but you'll have to travel far and search long to find it.

Atlantic white-sided dolphin, October 2002

'Dolphins'

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Atlantic white-sided dolphin, October 2002

Heritage in Schools' programme

Simon Berrow, Padraig Whooley and Faith Wilson are 'Marine Heritage Specialists' working on this programme, a partnership between the Heritage Council and the INTO. It enables specialists to visit primary schools for either half- or full-day visits. If you are interested in organising a visit or in finding out more, please contact: Simon Berrow, Co Clare, email: simon@berrow.ie; Phone: 086-854 5450. Padraig Whooley, Co Cork, email: padraigwhooley@eircom.net; Phone: 021-431 5723; or Faith Wilson, Co Dublin, email: faith@wilson.ie; Phone: 087-437 7128.
Broadhaven Bay blasting shelved

In August, the IWDG raised concerns regarding the decision of Enterprise Energy Ireland (EEl) to begin blasting underwater reefs in Broadhaven Bay (a marine SAC) in Co Mayo.

The blasting was to facilitate the laying of the pipeline from the offshore gas field to the onshore gas terminal. Given that permission for the location of the terminal had not yet been granted by An Bord Pleanala, the IWDG viewed the blasting which was to occur during the dolphin breeding season as deliberate disturbance.

Under Article 12 of the Habitats Directive, and the Natural Habitats Regulations (S.I. 94 of 1997) in Irish law, it is prohibited to capture, kill or cause deliberate disturbance to Annex IV species - which include all whales and dolphins - particularly during the period of breeding, rearing of young and migration.

Whales and dolphins live in an acoustic world, using sound to communicate and to locate their prey. They are highly sensitive to (and can be injured by) powerful sound waves such as those caused by blasting, drilling and seismic surveys. Underwater noise can also exclude dolphins and whales from their habitat, and species present in Broadhaven Bay at the proposed time of blasting included Risso's dolphin, bottlenose dolphin, common dolphin, harbour porpoise, white-beaked dolphin, Atlantic white-sided dolphin and minke whale.

The IWDG requested that EEl/Shell and the relevant authorities apply the precautionary principle and avoid causing unnecessary disturbance and possible trauma or injury to cetacean species, particularly dolphins with young calves. The IWDG suggested this could be done by postponing blasting to a less sensitive time, and asked that the EEl-funded baseline survey of cetaceans in Broadhaven Bay SAC be completed prior to any further developments.

Marine NGO snubbed by Corrib Monitoring Group

The IWDG has not been invited to participate in the Corrib Environmental Monitoring Group (CEMG) despite participating in the public consultation process over the last two years.

The CEMG is charged with monitoring development of the Corrib gas project during all stages of construction and development. The IWDG made three submissions to Enterprise Energy Ireland (EEl) regarding its development plan for the gas field stating that, prior to the commencement of works, an Environmental Management Plan (EMP) shall be drawn up and shall provide detailed construction methodology, and shall further consider all potential and predicted impacts and how they shall be managed, the mitigation and control measures and how they shall be implemented, as well as monitoring proposed.

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The CEMG is charged with monitoring development of the Corrib gas project during all stages of construction and development.

The IWDG was consulted by the EIS team via a phone call and drew attention to issues that should be considered, including a power analysis to determine the number of sightings and thus the area to be surveyed (based on encounter rate) in order to derive a confidence interval for determining change.

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Ireland and Law of the Sea


The book deals with topical maritime issues of concern to Ireland, including commercial fishing, drug interdiction, Ireland's maritime boundaries, new treaty commitments on marine pollution, and the role of the Irish Naval Service in relation to the Law of the Sea.
July 2002 saw the launch of a unique marine conservation project in Ireland to investigate the elusive basking shark (Cetorhinus maximus). Growing to a maximum of 12 metres in length and with a weight approaching seven tonnes, basking sharks are the North Atlantic's largest fish and are only superseded globally by the tropical whale shark.

This summer, I abandoned my usual job as an Environment and Heritage Service Ranger at Portrush Countryside Centre to join the survey yacht, Forever Changes, in search of basking sharks and cetaceans off the Irish coast. As our crew of live-aboard volunteers assembled on the north coast of Wales, a high-pressure system developed over Britain and Ireland, producing calm seas and light winds – excellent conditions for surface sightings. Our expectations were high, and we were not to be disappointed...over the course of the next six days our survey team encountered five massive basking sharks, in addition to two minke whales, eight harbour porpoise and a school of 150-200 highly energetic common dolphins, and all within Irish coastal waters!

The Seasequest Basking Shark Project is organised by the Wildlife and Countryside Action Plan. It is the first project in Ireland to investigate the elusive basking shark, which is the largest marine species found in British waters. The project aims to determine the distribution and abundance of basking sharks in the Irish Sea, and to provide data on their habitat preferences and movements.

Great encounters

Our first unforgettable encounter, however, was not with sharks but with 150-200 common dolphins about 15 miles east of Dun Laoghaire. Moments earlier, we had spotted a large shoal of dolphins, which were now swimming, breaching and riding the bow-wave of the yacht. Occasionally, one dolphin would aggressively ram another out of the bow-wave.

Twenty minutes later, two harbour porpoise were sighted, followed closely by the first of two fast-travelling minke whales. Photographing these porpoises proved difficult. However, the minke surfaced three or four times before diving out of range of our cameras, allowing just enough time to film and photograph this fantastic creature. Over the course of the following five hours we sighted a further seven harbour porpoise and one minke whale at a distance.

During the next few days, five solitary basking sharks were surface-sighted, feeding along clearly defined thermal fronts which ran parallel to the shore. Four sharks were photographed off the coast of Co Down and one particularly large nine-metre bull basking shark was sighted off Larne, Co Antrim. Two of these sharks displayed clearly visible and recognisable identification features. The first basking shark at Raffquart Point (just south of the mouth of Strangford Lough, Northern Ireland's only Marine Nature Reserve) was about eight metres in length and had a rounded dorsal fin with a substantial notch in the trailing edge, together with obvious damage to the upper lobe of the tail fin. The fifth shark which was filmed off Larne had a floppy first dorsal fin - an obvious change in the angle of the leading edge provided evidence of a possible injury at some stage of the animal's life. The other three animals were viewed from a distance and did not show any obvious markings, scars or peculiarities which could be used to photo-identify them.

Great encounters

The Seasequest Basking Shark Project represented the first effort-related survey in Northern Ireland's coastal waters and the first to use photo-identification as a valid tool for researching sharks in this region. The project aimed to fulfil those actions outlined in the UK National Biodiversity Action Plan which concentrate on identifying areas of critical importance for the species. Additionally, the project contributed data towards Action No 9, "Contribute to the Regional Seas Project in the Irish Sea," identified in the Environment and Heritage Service Biodiversity Action Plan.

Basking sharks are currently listed as vulnerable on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species and are formally protected from hunting, disturbance and harassment in British waters under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981), and more recently under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000). However, this protection does not currently apply to basking sharks in the coastal waters of Northern Ireland.

Although staff at Portrush Countryside Centre regularly encounter cetaceans such as harbour porpoise, Risso's dolphin, bottlenose dolphin and even the occasional minke, pilot whale and orca, sightings or strandings of fish such as basking shark are few and far between. Experiencing basking sharks first-hand was unforgettable and for me a defining moment. Interestingly, in the weeks following the survey, six basking sharks were seen feeding off Whiteocks, Ramore Head, Portstewart and even within Portrush Harbour – encouragement to anyone interested that it really is possible to see these fantastic creatures off Northern Ireland.

Basking shark sightings in Irish waters may be reported to the IWDG. We will add such sightings to our sightings or strandings database and forward them to interested groups in the UK and elsewhere upon request.
 EVENTS

● Whale-watching and related events in 2002-2003

Whale-watching weekend courses 2003

By Padraig Whoo/ey

The IWDG whale-watching courses that ran on Cape Clear Island, Co Cork, and Loop Head, Co Clare, in 2002, yet again proved a great success.

During 2003, we have decided to focus on Cape Clear for the three weekend courses, which will run on 18-20th July, 15-17th August and 19-21st September.

The following report on the Cape Clear weekends in 2002 should serve to whet your appetite - Cape Clear's reputation as one of Europe's premier destinations for cetaceans and seabirds is second to none.

Dolphin activity was well down during the July course, with just one sighting of 10 common dolphins on Friday. However, the minke whales foraging in their usual haunts around Gascanaun Sound more than compensated for this. Minke whales were seen on all watches throughout the weekend, and on Saturday as many as 5-7 minkes were seen, with some approaching within clear viewing range from the cliffs.

Cetaceans were observed at six of nine locations (66%). Interestingly, all three of the west-coast sites - Clogher Head in Kerry, Loop Head in Clare and Downpatrick Head in Mayo - drew a blank, which is surprising, as these are the locations you would normally rely on to produce cetaceans. Two species, harbour porpoise and common dolphin, were positively identified, with probable sightings of bottlenose dolphin (Hook Head, Wexford) and killer whale (Ramore Head, Derry) that couldn't be confirmed. Other marine species seen were grey seals, ocean sunfish and many seabirds.

Any interested in making a booking or finding out more about the IWDG whale-watching weekends, please contact: Padraig Whoo/ey, IWDG Secretary, phone (023) 46844, email: padraigwhooley@eircom.net or visit our website at www.iwdg.ie.

Committee meetings

The IWDG Committee meets three times a year. If members have any suggestions or issues they wish to draw to the attention of the Committee, please send them to the Chairperson, Dr Simon Berrow, sdw@oceanfree.net, at least two weeks prior to any meeting. Meetings in 2003 will be as follows:

18-19th January, Wexford
17-18th May, Belmullet, Co Mayo
20-21st Sept, Galley Head, Co Cork

WhaleWatch Ireland 2002

Our second all-island whale-watch day, WhaleWatch Ireland 2002, held on 18th August, proved another success, with 1,500 people joining us on nine headlands. The 50% increase in turnout was due largely to the local push by Chris Wilson of Wexford Wildfowl Reserve and Kevin McCormick, local IWDG co-coordinator, who provided strong back-up to Faith Wilson who led the huge crowd of 600+ at Hook Head in County Wexford.

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Thanks to all of you who came out to support this event, which we will hold again on Sunday, 3rd August 2003. This has now become an international event, as the UK-based Seawatch Foundation will also hold their whale-watching event on the same day. More details of locations, times and local contacts will follow in next summer's issue, our website and group emails.

Congratulations

Many thanks to Phyllis Ryan and Susan Kavanagh, IWDG members, who ran the Mini-Marathon and raised €298 for the IWDG, and to Kilrush School pupils who raised €226.

ID Photo Competition

Can You Identify This Marine Mammal?

The first correct answer received by the Editor will receive a copy of the new IWDG Sightings Review 1991-2001. We will give you one hint: haunts no Irish Cape.

Some found the Cape Clear experience exhausting (July 2002)
The IWDG received reports of 127 cetacean strandings around the Irish coast by the end of October 2002, comprising a minimum of eight species. Of these, harbour porpoise (26) and common dolphin (24) were the most frequently recorded. Strandings were reported from most coastal counties, with the exceptions of Down, Louth, Meath and Leitrim. Counties Cork (19), Wexford (12), Clare (10) and Mayo (10) had the most records, possibly indicating cetacean distribution or observer coverage. Strandings of note included the mass-stranding of around 40 pilot whales in August/September. Co Kerry (See IWDG News, No 21). Nineteen died as a direct result of stranding, but with the aid of local residents the remainder were re-floated. Five of these were subsequently found stranded dead. Two more unusual strandings occurred in July: a Cuvier's beaked whale stranded in Sligo, while a pygmy sperm whale live-stranded in Co Kerry was subsequently euthanased. The pygmy sperm whale was the fifth stranding record of its kind for Ireland this century.

Two turtle strandings were reported to the IWDG, one of a loggerhead turtle on the Aran Islands, the other of remains of a leatherback turtle found near Pollathomas, Co Mayo. A second loggerhead found near Kinsale was brought to Dingle Ocean World for rehabilitation.

Finally, we would like to thank all those who reported strandings to the group. If you come across a dead cetacean, please contact Emer Rogan at University College Cork (087-699 5314) or the IWDG Strandings Scheme on iwdg@eircom.net.

### Table: Cetacean strandings 2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Species</th>
<th>Latin name</th>
<th>Number reported</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harbour porpoise</td>
<td>Phocoena phocoena</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common dolphin</td>
<td>Delphinus delphis</td>
<td>24*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White-sided dolphin</td>
<td>Lagenorhynchus australis</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottlenose dolphin</td>
<td>Tursiops truncatus</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Striped dolphin</td>
<td>Stenella coerulea</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risso's dolphin</td>
<td>Grampus griseus</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilot whale</td>
<td>Globicephala melas</td>
<td>48**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottlenose whale</td>
<td>Hyperoodon ampullatus</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuvier's beaked whale</td>
<td>Ziphius caviius</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pygmy sperm whale</td>
<td>Kogia breviceps</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sperm whale</td>
<td>Physeter macrocephalus</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fin whale</td>
<td>Balaenoptera physalus</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minke whale</td>
<td>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unidentified cetaceans</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leatherback turtle</td>
<td>Dermachelys coriacea</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loggerhead turtle</td>
<td>Coretta caretta</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* includes a multiple stranding of 7 animals
** includes a multiple stranding of 40 animals

On 24th October 2002, 15 beached whales stranded on the islands of the Canaries Archipelago off north Africa. The whales stranded during a NATO military exercise which was being conducted around the islands at the time. Four mass whale strandings have occurred in the islands in the last 20 years, and each one of them coincided with NATO naval exercises. Researchers said autopsies on the dead whales found brain damage consistent with impacts from military sonar signals. The tests also demonstrated the whales were otherwise "healthy and in good shape" before their deaths. A second set of tests focusing on the inner ears, expected to take a few weeks, is expected to establish the cause of the beaching with greater certainty.

On 21st October, a federal judge ordered the National Science Foundation to stop firing sound blasts into the Gulf of California after siding with conservationists who said sound blasts used to map the ocean floor have disrupted marine life in the ocean between Baja California and mainland Mexico. The case was brought by the Centre for Biological Diversity who said two dead Cuvier's beaked whales found on the Mexican coast in September likely beached themselves because of noise from air guns above the government research vessel.

Then, on 31st October, a federal judge issued a preliminary injunction stopping the US Navy from deploying a new high-intensity sonar system that could hurt or kill whales, dolphins, seals and sea turtles with its loud signals. The sonar system, known as Surveillance Towed Array Sensor System Low Frequency Active sonar (SURTASS LFA), relies on very loud, low frequency sound to detect submarines at great distances.

In a new twist, it was recently discovered that SURTASS LFA is being tested by the Royal Navy in Scottish waters. The tests are being carried out without the permission of the statutory environmental agency, Scottish Natural Heritage, which has now demanded a meeting with the navy to discuss the issue. A spokesman said: "We have previously been assured that neither the Royal Navy nor other NATO forces use Low Frequency Active (LFA) sonar during training in Scottish waters, and we're unaware of any testing being carried out off the coast of Scotland."

In answer to your request for Irish names for cetaceans, in IWDG News, Issue 21, I submit the following short piece for your journal.

Since the 1980s, I have been collecting local names and place-names from Roaringwater Bay, west Cork, in order to reconstruct the former perception of the natural history and landscape of the archipelago. The following information may be helpful to you when researching old names for whales, dolphins and porpoise. Names for flora and fauna are often local and in dialect. Irish, English and bilingual names should be recorded. It is important to identify the location from which the information comes, and whether the source is from the oral tradition (teller's name, year of birth and brief biography) or from a document. In the case of an interview, the phonetics of the word or phrase should be written down or even taped. A hypothetical case is as follows: an anid mór, sounding like [on-'meel-'mor] - the apostrophes indicate equal emphasis on the last two syllables.

There is one place-name of interest on Oileán Chléire (Cape Clear Island). It is Cuaisín na Mhuile Mara below the high, southern coast of the island. It is shown on the map in Conchúr O Stiúrthóir's book, Seanchas Chléire, and means 'little inlet of the porpoise' (note the use of the singular). The harbour porpoise (Phocoena phocoena), which is relatively common around the island, is nicknamed by islanders an t6ithineach [on-'to'heen-ak], the 'fat fellah.'

Interestingly, along this stretch of coast, divers have noticed freshwater welling up through the sea [personal communication, the late Bryan McAuliffe] and there is some evidence for springs issuing near to the high-water mark. For example, in a small indentation in the cliffs, a short distance to the west, freshwater seepages with high nutrient levels are indicated by localised growths of the seaweed Enteromorpha. The inlet is shown on the Ordnance Survey map as Coosaysloosh, which I would interpret as Cuas a'Ghlas-L6igh, or 'inlet of the green, light weed.' It is possible that these springs issue from a small aquifer fed by rainfall percolating through rock fissures in the adjacent moorland of Quarantine. The seepages may once have been a useful supply of freshwater for fishermen in small boats, and perhaps the submarine flows have some value to the minke whales, common dolphins and porpoise that are often observed close to the coast.
The Irish Whale and Dolphin Group has established a network of contacts who will visit stranded animals and collect records of those sighted at sea. If you find a whale, dolphin or porpoise washed up, or observe one at sea or from the shore, please tell your nearest contact person.

**IWDG contacts around the coast**

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**Acknowledgements**

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**IWDG News**

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