

PROTECTING OUR SEAS

Supporting fisheries management in Welsh MPAs

In 2020-21 seabed surveys were carried out by ENVISION for the Welsh Fishermen's Association - Cymdeithas Pysgotwyr Cymru (WFA-CPC) in two Welsh Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), where interaction between mobile fishing gear and conservation features have been highlighted as a potential issue.

The study supported ongoing work by the Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales to evaluate interactions between fishing activities and features of Welsh Marine Protected Areas (MPAs).

Surveys were completed in the Severn Estuary/Môr Hafren SAC to explore the location of *Sabellaria alveolata* reefs and in Cardigan Bay/Bae Ceredigion SAC to establish the extent and 'reefiness' of cobble/boulder habitats.

The results have successfully added to the growing evidence base required to prioritise and support Welsh Government management options for fisheries in these areas.



What was done and why?

The Welsh Government (WG), in partnership with Natural Resource Wales (NRW) is evaluating interactions between fishing activities and features of Welsh Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) under the Assessing Welsh Fishing Activities (AWFA) Project¹. With guidance from WG/NRW, this study set out to explore the extent of marine features for which high risk interactions with mobile fishing gears have been identified within two Welsh SACs.

¹<https://naturalresources.wales/about-us/our-projects/marine-projects/assessing-welsh-fishing-activities/>

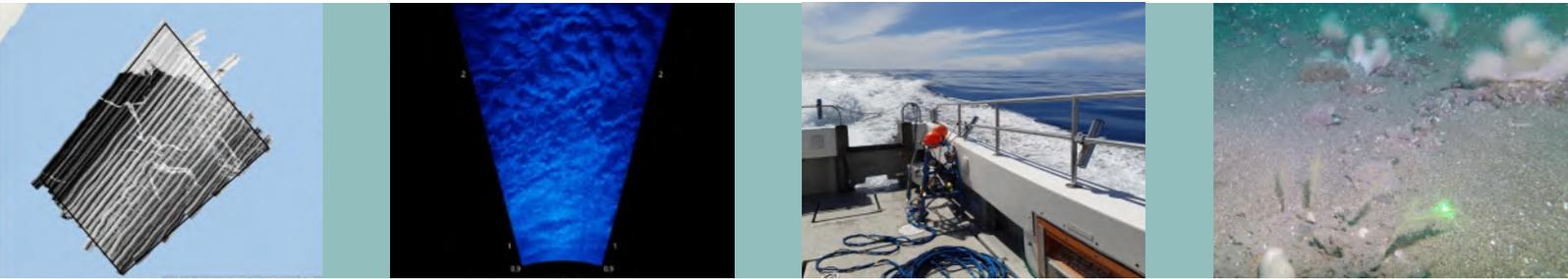
The **PROTECTING OUR SEAS** Project, through the **Welsh Fishermen's Association - Cymdeithas Pysgotwyr Cymru**, with funding by the **European Maritime and Fisheries Fund** and match funded by **Welsh Government**, has been carried out by **ENVISION** and associates and is part of ongoing work by the **Welsh Government** and **Natural Resources Wales**.



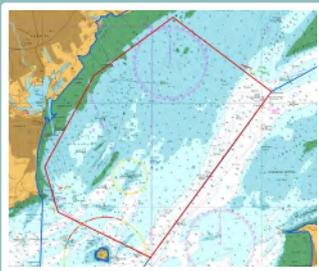
THE STUDY SITES

SEVERN ESTUARY | MÔR HAFREN SAC

CARDIGAN BAY | BAE CEREDIGION SAC



Using existing data and information from local fishers, the surveys also employed a variety of different techniques on the sites at different scales to produce maps and information to better inform and prioritise Welsh Government management decisions.



Wider survey area within the SAC

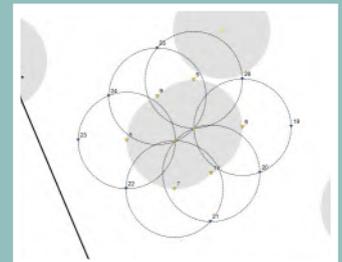
Sabellaria in the Severn Estuary | Môr Hafren SAC

The first study phase produced seabed imagery for the Severn Estuary near Cardiff, to better understand the extent and distribution of Sabellaria reef in relation to current mobile fishing activity.

Through fisher consultation, the spatial extent of mobile gear activity was confirmed. Benthic and geophysical surveys were then carried out in areas where both this fishing activity occurs and where Sabellaria has previously been recorded. The resulting bathymetry, sidescan sonar, AGDS and acoustic imagery data were reviewed to identify potential features or areas of variable ground, shown as red boxes in the adjacent figure.

Much of the areas surveyed were relatively featureless, comprised of coarse or softer sediments with sand waves and ripples. Areas of more variable seabed, or 'rough' ground, were not identifiable as Sabellaria colonies or characteristic reef features.

Cobble and boulder 'reefiness' in Cardigan Bay | Bae Ceredigion SAC



Sample plan design for surveys

Management options within Cardigan Bay/Bae Ceredigion SAC are considered regularly by WG and understanding the status of conservation features which may be affected by mobile fishing gears is necessary for assessment.

Surveys were undertaken using underwater camera systems adjacent to an area which is seasonally closed to scallop fishing, to establish the extent of 'medium' quality Annex I cobble/boulder reef at previously reported locations.

The distribution of Annex 1 features and habitats recorded were plotted with GIS. The majority of habitats observed at sample stations were sedimentary with some infauna apparent, often interspersed with patchy cobbles and boulders.

Several areas showed 'Low' resemblance to Annex 1 stony reef, but were very patchy in distribution. Evidence suggested that it is not possible to define extents of areas with 'medium' resemblance to Annex 1 stony reef within the areas surveyed.

For full reports, more information and questions please contact WFA-CPC

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