

# Making Waves

## The Fair Isle Marine Environment and Tourism Initiative

NEWSLETTER 6: APRIL 2008  
Compiled by: Nick Riddiford  
Edited by: Elizabeth Riddiford



For centuries Fair Islanders have looked after their resources - not for any altruistic reason, but because they had no other option. Greater mobility and changes in marine legislation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century meant that others now had access to a resource which had previously been largely for local use. The new user groups were free from the constraints of safeguarding stock for future use, because for them Fair Isle waters were only part of a wider resource. The islanders could no longer compete and the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a wholesale and difficult shift from a subsistence economy with fishing at its heart, to a more mixed economy. What has not changed, however, is that the new economy still relies strongly on our ties with the sea. From traditional Shetland *yoal* boat-building to the tourist trade, the key element for those earning a living on the isle remains a healthy marine environment and maintenance of the marine resource.

The Fair Isle community is very concerned that we are effectively excluded from having a say in the control and management of our marine resource – a resource which has sustained us for centuries and which remains at the heart of our economic and social life. The Fair Isle community recognises the imperative need to safeguard our resources, terrestrial and marine, for future generations. Our concerns are social and economic as much as environmental. A healthy, pristine environment is an essential ingredient for our future well-being.

Photograph on front cover.  
**Oysterplant at Muckle Uri Geo, South Light, Fair Isle.**  
Photographer Dave Wheeler. © 2008.

FIMETI logo by Fiona Mitchell.

# Making Waves

## The Fair Isle Marine Environment and Tourism Initiative

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### Progress... perhaps? One year on...

Last year's newsletter was full of hope regarding a number of initiatives which appeared to point the way, at last, to sustainable management planning for Scotland's marine and coastal area. Fair Isle, in particular, had made its case clear as a candidate for Scotland's first Coastal Marine National Park (CMNP); and was engaging in a Shetland pilot study for the Scottish Sustainable Marine Environment Initiative (SSMEI).

#### [Coastal and Marine National Park](#)

Despite our representations, Fair Isle failed to make the shortlist for a CMNP. Size and "isolation" were the apparent reasons ruling us out. There was a change in government too, and it is no longer certain that the new administration is as keen on the CMNP concept as its predecessor.

#### [Nationally Important Marine Areas](#)

In another setback, Fair Isle found itself excluded from a list of Nationally Important Marine Areas (NIMAs) published in the document *Finding NIMAs, a case for Nationally Important Marine Areas* by the Scottish Environment LINK Marine Task Force, a force comprising seven environmental organisations in Scotland including the National Trust for Scotland. The premise of this document was that Scotland's most important marine biodiversity should be safeguarded through the establishment of a network of Nationally Important Marine Areas which (to quote from the covering letter for the document) "*would consist of areas representative of Scotland's marine habitats, areas of exceptional biodiversity, areas to protect nationally important marine wildlife and areas to protect important feeding, spawning, mating and migration sites for mobile species*".

Despite the inclusion of a supporting comment from FIMETI (*see box 1*), the document failed to include Fair Isle in its network of sites. The birdwatchers amongst you will be amazed that Fair Isle is omitted. The isle supports a larger range of

breeding seabird species than any other single locality in the UK, and possibly Europe; and several of them qualify under universally applied parameters (1% or more of the UK and/or European population) as of national or international importance. I will leave readers to ponder how Fair Isle is not a National Important Marine Area.

Box 1. Fair Isle comment published in *Finding NIMAs*

*“The sea has always been at the heart of our economic and social life, but the Fair Isle Community is still excluded from having any say in its control and management. We would like to see the Scottish Government bring forward a Marine Bill that gives a local voice in marine planning and ensures that a healthy natural environment becomes the basis for our future economic and social well-being.”*

Nick Riddiford, Co-ordinator, FIMETI

## **Two steps backward, three steps forward?**

Despite these setbacks, Fair Isle continues to engage in the process which will surely eventually lead to safeguarding our marine area and the vital resources it affords our community.

### *First step forward: SSMEI*

One step towards this is our continued participation in and support of the Scottish Sustainable Marine Environment Initiative Shetland pilot. Nick Riddiford, Fiona Mitchell, Elizabeth Riddiford and Stewart Thomson (Quoy) have shared the task of representing the isle on the SSMEI Shetland steering group – through attendance of meetings at the North Atlantic Fisheries College, Shetland, or by means of video conference link from the isle. It is gratifying to record that the isle has received a lot of support and understanding from other members of the steering group; and it is equally gratifying that we have been able to make our views and situation more widely known within this group.

The main aim of the pilot from the very start was to propose a series of policies for sustainable management of the marine area, thus bringing the same level of planning to Shetland seas as applies already to the terrestrial counterpart. Under the astute leadership of the pilot study’s project director, Dr Lorraine Gray, a Shetland Marine Spatial Plan (MSP) was published as a consultative document and circulated for comment in February 2008.

The document comprises two main parts. *Part one: Policy Framework* and *Part two: Marine Atlas*. Part two comprises a series of maps for the whole of the Shetland islands, including Fair Isle. Issues as wide ranging as archaeology, cable routes, ferry routes, fishing grounds, important habitats and species, nature conservation areas,

navigation aids and channels, recreation, protected shipwrecks, water quality and more are mapped. Some inaccuracies or incomplete information for Fair Isle has been identified by islanders and work is now in progress to update the information on large scale maps of the isle provided since by Dr Gray.

The bulk of Part one is a series of policies to address the various issues relating to Shetland's marine area with the focus very much on ensuring that future development takes into account and respects the premise of sustainability. The policies look very much to the future and comparatively little space is given to the important task of achieving sustainability now. That issue is addressed in just two pages: one on *Identifying and restoring damaged ecosystems* and one on *Minimising conflicts*.

The Policy Framework was developed based on the vision, aim and objectives of the Plan. These are stated at the start of Part one. They bear a striking resemblance to those already identified and stated by the Fair Isle community. The Shetland Plan's vision, aim and objectives are given below (Box 2). Fair Isle can endorse them all. All of the objectives address Fair Isle's particular case and, if universally respected and applied rigorously, will meet the long-held aspirations of the local community. However, certain aspects are very pertinent to Fair Isle and attention is drawn to these by highlighting them in bold in Box 2 below.

Box 2. A Marine Spatial Plan for the Shetland Islands

Vision: the marine and coastal environment is one that is clean, healthy, safe and productive, **managed to meet the long-term needs of nature and the local people.**

Aim: ***Ensure that use of the marine and coastal environment of Shetland is sustainable.*** Sustainable use will enable dynamic economic activity supporting a prosperous community whilst maintaining and enhancing marine wildlife, habitats and ecosystems. Sustainable use should not lead to loss of biodiversity or ecological balance, or reduce the **availability of natural resources for future generations.**

Objectives:

1. Establish policies to manage a productive marine and coastal environment **for the benefit and prosperity of local communities.**
2. Integrate with other planning and regulatory systems.
3. Take account of natural changes in, and improved knowledge of the marine and coastal environment.
4. **Safeguard areas where there are locally and nationally important marine species and habitats.**
5. Assess the sensitivities of marine wildlife and habitats to current and future uses.
6. **Identify areas with differing priorities for sustainable use.**
7. **Identify and restore damaged marine habitats and ecosystems.**
8. **Identify and manage activity to minimise conflict.**

## *Second step forward: Fair Isle MSP*

One of the 2007 SSMEI steering group meetings was held on Fair Isle, hosted by Fair Isle Bird Observatory in April. As reported in the Newsletter 5, the meeting was attended by the national coordinator of SSMEI, David Mallon. Impressed by the level of commitment and knowledge amongst the island community, Mr Mallon pledged a substantial sum of money to the isle to assist the SSMEI (Shetland) pilot in pulling together the considerable Fair Isle data and feeding them into the project.

At a subsequent meeting of the steering group, a number of members pointed out that Fair Isle had already made its case for sustainable management and surely it was time to move on to addressing this case. As a result of these comments it was resolved to invite the isle to engage in the preparation of a local Marine Spatial Plan for the isle which would act as an adjunct to the overall Shetland MSP.

The idea was accepted enthusiastically by the isle, because sustainable management of the marine area had been the goal for many years. It was also felt that the isle had the knowledge and ability to do the work. Despite this, and the promise by Mr Mallon that money would be forthcoming to the isle for its contribution to SSMEI, a decision was made that the Fair Isle MSP should be managed from the North Atlantic Fisheries College, Shetland, with supporting input from the isle. Following considerable discussion, an equal share of money was agreed towards the costs of the NAFC and the isle. A post graduate student, Dave Denoon, was appointed to manage the project and work began with his appointment in September 2007. Dave would be based at North Atlantic Fisheries College but would make regular visits to the isle.

One of the first steps undertaken was to set up a working group on Fair Isle to liaise with Dave Denoon. The working group was established as Ian Best, John Best, Tommy Hyndman, Fiona Mitchell, Elizabeth Riddiford, Deryk Shaw (FIBO), Anne Sinclair, Iain Stout, James W Stout, Neil Thomson, Stewart Thomson jnr and Dave Wheeler. Nick Riddiford, as coordinator of FIMETI, would act as the main contact and lead correspondent for the working group.

The duration of the Fair Isle MSP project is one year. A plan of work was drawn up early on by Dave Denoon which defined the tasks to be performed and the timescale. The working group has met twice so far with Dave Denoon. The second meeting gave the opportunity for a series of views to be aired and this helped to clarify the steps the isle working group needed to take in relation to development of the MSP.

The arrival of the Shetland Marine Spatial Plan document coincided with the second working group meeting. This was helpful because it gave the isle its first sight of how the document looked and the content, approach and style required for the Fair Isle MSP. Thus, the Shetland MSP can act as a template for development of our own.

### [Third step forward: Partnerships and Support](#)

The omission of Fair Isle from the *Finding NIMAs* document was received with a mixture of astonishment and annoyance on the isle. These views were conveyed, in a carefully considered letter (see Appendix 1), to the convener of the Scottish Environment LINK Task Force, Calum Duncan. This elicited a response in which the criteria for identifying NIMAs - which do not include seabirds - were explained.

The reply was much more than a defence of the document. In addition to convener of LINK, Calum Duncan is Scottish Conservation Manager of the Marine Conservation Society (MCS). His reply included an offer from the MCS to work with our community towards getting an appropriate designation for the Fair Isle marine area. He quoted the COAST example (see Box 3) and suggested that we might like to explore the same route. At more or less the same time, Richard Luxmoore, the National Trust for Scotland's marine conservation officer, had written along the same lines. It has been agreed, therefore, that FIMETI work in close partnership with the MCS and NTS towards this end.



Panorama from Klingers Geo towards Hesswalls, Vaasetter, Klavers Geo & Sheep Craig on the east side of Fair Isle. Area notable for its ship wreck sites and the island's newest Gannet colony. Photo © Elizabeth Riddiford, 2008.

### [Another step forward? Michael Russell, Scottish Environment Minister](#)

With the change in Scottish government, there were some encouraging early signs that the new administration recognised the importance both of moving on sustainable management of the marine environment and the role of rural communities in managing the resource. This was made clear by Michael Russell, the new Scottish Environment Minister, during a visit to Shetland in September 2007. No-one from the isle was able to attend an open meeting hosted by the Minister during his visit, so we are grateful for friends and supporters of our endeavours, including the Shetland representatives of Fair Isle Bird Observatory, for both feedback and direct intervention on our behalf with the Minister. The issue of our aspirations and efforts was raised and the Minister not only indicated that he was aware and appreciative of the isle's commitment, but would also be delighted to visit the isle if invited.

This offer was discussed at the next Fair Isle Committee meeting, which approved the drafting of a letter inviting the Minister to visit – specifically to discuss the urgent

need for sustainable management of the marine resource and the community's input into a local marine spatial plan which must achieve just that.

After initially accepting the invitation in principle, at a future undetermined date, the Minister confirmed in March that he was planning to visit in June 2008 once the parliament had broken for its summer break.

It is only when people visit the isle that they gauge the strength of feeling and determination of the community; and the socio-economic justification of our aspirations – a message conveyed politely but clearly by everyone.



'Fair Isle fishermen & their boats'.

One of the many photos included in the 'Maritime History' section of FIMETI's new website.  
Photo © George Waterston Memorial Centre.

## **New website for FIMETI**

More information than we are able to include in a Newsletter can be found on Fair Isle Marine Environment & Tourism Initiative's new website at <http://www.fimeti.org.uk>.

This website is being developed to provide a much greater insight into the work of FIMETI and Fair Isle community's efforts in sustainable management of its terrestrial and marine resource. It has lots of photos and background information, including sections on Maritime History, the Fair Isle Marine Database and much more. The website also gives access to some of FIMETI's previous reports and publications such as 'Managing the Sea for Birds', 'Safeguarding our Heritage' and earlier Newsletters.

If you would like to register your support for FIMETI and for the island community's tireless efforts towards a marine protected area for Fair Isle waters, then please do so by signing the website's Guestbook.

<http://www.fimeti.org.uk> is an important extension to the Fair Isle community's official website (<http://www.fairisle.org.uk>).

## Marine Wildlife

### *Seabirds in 2007*

Overview: following a comparatively successful breeding season in 2006, the 2007 season reverted to recent type. Apart from gannet and shag, every species had well below average breeding success, a lack of suitable food being the primary cause. Lesser sandeels were still very scarce and those that were available were particularly small. Snake pipefish were still very much in evidence, rejected by chicks and found discarded around many nests and colonies.

Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*: numbers of Apparently Occupied Sites (AOS) on the plots fell by 12.1% compared to 2006, to the third lowest on record and are currently 37.1% lower than when monitoring began in 1987. Productivity was below average with a mean from the five plots of 0.35 (range 0.24-0.43).

Gannet *Sula bassana*: the breeding population continues to rise, reached a new record of 1,957 Apparently Occupied Nests (AON). A new breeding colony has been initiated on Lerness (56 AON) and the Sheep Rock site also continues to increase, from 44 to 50 AON. Breeding success was characteristically high owing to this species having huge foraging ranges and an ability to take larger fish species such as mackerel and herring.

Northern Gannet on nest, Fair Isle.  
Photograph © Deryk Shaw 2008.  
Courtesy of Fair Isle Bird Observatory.



Shag *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*: this species had a better breeding season than most. Following a huge number of nests on the plots in 2006, numbers fell slightly (-4.4%) this year whilst breeding success (1.40 chicks fledged per nest) was only just below the long-term mean (1.44).

Skuas: following four years of extremely poor breeding success and falling numbers, great skuas *Stercorarius skua* had a surprisingly successful season in 2006 (record numbers of Apparently Occupied Territories (AOT) and a productivity of 0.95). They increased again this year, up to 18.5% to 224 AOT. However, only 101 chicks fledged (a productivity of 0.45) with starvation and intra-specific depredation the suspected reasons for failures.

Arctic Skuas *Stercorarius parasiticus* have been in trouble since 1998 with falling numbers and very low breeding success. The years 2003-05 saw a total of just ten birds fledge. Things improved dramatically in 2006 with the highest number of AOT (105) since the early 1990s and good productivity (0.82). In 2007 however, the situation deteriorated once again and from 68 AOT (a 35.2% decrease), not a single chick fledged.



Dark phase Arctic Skua, Fair Isle.  
Photograph © Deryk Shaw 2008.  
Courtesy of Fair Isle Bird Observatory.

Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*: the species in most trouble! Numbers of AON at the plots continued to fall (by 27.0% since 2006) to the lowest ever – 82.4% less than in 1987. Although the vast majority (91%) of pairs built nests and laid eggs, 44.8% failed at this stage whilst those chicks that did hatch were lucky to survive beyond two weeks. Only four chicks fledged from 254 nests on the monitoring plots – only the complete failures of 2003 and 2004 have been worse. Depredation and starvation were the cause of failure. Many chicks and adults regurgitated snake pipefish and these were also evident as discards in nests indicating a lack of availability of favoured food (i.e. sandeels).



Black-legged Kittiwakes on nests, Fair Isle.  
Photograph © Deryk Shaw 2008.  
Courtesy of Fair Isle Bird Observatory.

Arctic tern *Sterna paradisaea*: in 2006, after five consecutive years of failure to fledge any chicks and with numbers of nesting birds dwindling each year, it was a surprise to record over 800 Apparently Incubating Adults (AIA) and even more surprise that over 300 chicks fledged – a productivity of 0.39. We therefore waited with baited breath to see what would happen in 2007. Around 150 birds arrived in mid May, but all departed a week later. Birds returned in late May and an estimated 208 AIA were counted in two colonies – on Bunes and at South Light. However, only a handful of eggs managed to hatch (the chicks of which died shortly after) before the whole colony was deserted for good.

Guillemot *Uria aalge*: numbers of birds on the plots were the lowest on record (32.5% less than in 2006) and only small numbers of eggs were laid. Productivity at the two monitoring sites was markedly different: Peitron 0.47 and Da Swadin 0.06 (mean 0.37). Observations during ringing trips into various colonies would suggest that the figure from Da Swadin was (unfortunately) more representative of the isle as a whole. Feeding watches indicated that provisioning rates were very low (1.9 feeds/chick/day) and although 56.6% of food items were sandeels, these were of less than average size.



Common Guillemots, Fair Isle.  
Photograph © Deryk Shaw 2008.  
Courtesy of Fair Isle Bird Observatory.

Razorbill *Alca torda*: the ten years (1994-2003) saw a mean productivity at the Easter Lother monitoring plot of 0.60. However in 2004, productivity was **zero** for the first time ever and despite record numbers of eggs being laid, fledging success has been poor each year since (0.44 in 2005, 0.23 in 2006). A good number of eggs were again laid this year but only half (51.6%) of these actually hatched and, as in recent years, repeat biometrics showed that chicks were in very poor condition (some even losing weight between visits to the colony). For the second time on record no chicks fledged.

Puffin *Fratercula arctica*: puffins have always appeared to be fairly successful, with productivity between 1990 and 2005 never falling below 0.57 (apart from in 2001 – productivity of 0.31). In 2006 it was slightly below this figure, at 0.47. Breeding success in 2007 was much worse. A final productivity of 0.17 is a very disappointing result, bringing puffin breeding success in line with other auk species. A combination of a lack of sandeels (with many discarded snake pipefish found in burrows) and a period of wet weather in late July/August (causing several burrows to be flooded) were major factors in this crash. Very small rockling were a significant part of the diet of chicks.

Contributed by Deryk Shaw.



Atlantic Puffin, Fair Isle.  
Photograph © Deryk Shaw 2008.  
Courtesy of Fair Isle Bird Observatory.

## *Fish -*

There was an improvement in the whitefish recorded during the summer of 2007, with more haddock on the inshore ground. However, the percentage of no-take fish is still very high at around 70% in haddock and 80% in whiting. Whilst there are more adult fish on the main East and West banks, the persistent trawling by boats from elsewhere makes it very difficult to get a true representation, and the by catch is excessive.

On the smaller banks inshore, there are signs that the benthos is recovering to a certain extent, with a reoccurrence of fish like gurnard, flounder and squid.



Fair Isle fisherman, Stewart Thomson, with a freshly-caught Ling weighing approx. 6lb. Photograph © Peter Burton 2008.

Saith are very numerous, with large schools concentrating on the North and East sides. At the start of the season their food was mostly sandeel, but later on the main food source appeared to be snake pipe-fish. Apart from the lack of nutrition in these fish, they have a detrimental effect on the saithe in that in quite a large number of cases we found that the snake pipe-fish had perforated the stomach walls of the saithe, causing tumors to form.

Ling were plentiful and of good quality on the few occasions we managed to get offshore in the back end of the season, and a number of cod were also caught on these trips.

Mackerel were present from the end of June but were not of the best quality and were very spotty on the ground. A Fish Finder Depth meter was essential to locate them as they did not appear on any of the old meads (traditional fishing hands).

Rarities include squid, lesser forkbeard (washed ashore) and a cuckoo wrasse. The cuckoo wrasse is only the third record for Fair Isle.

Contributed by Stewart Thomson.

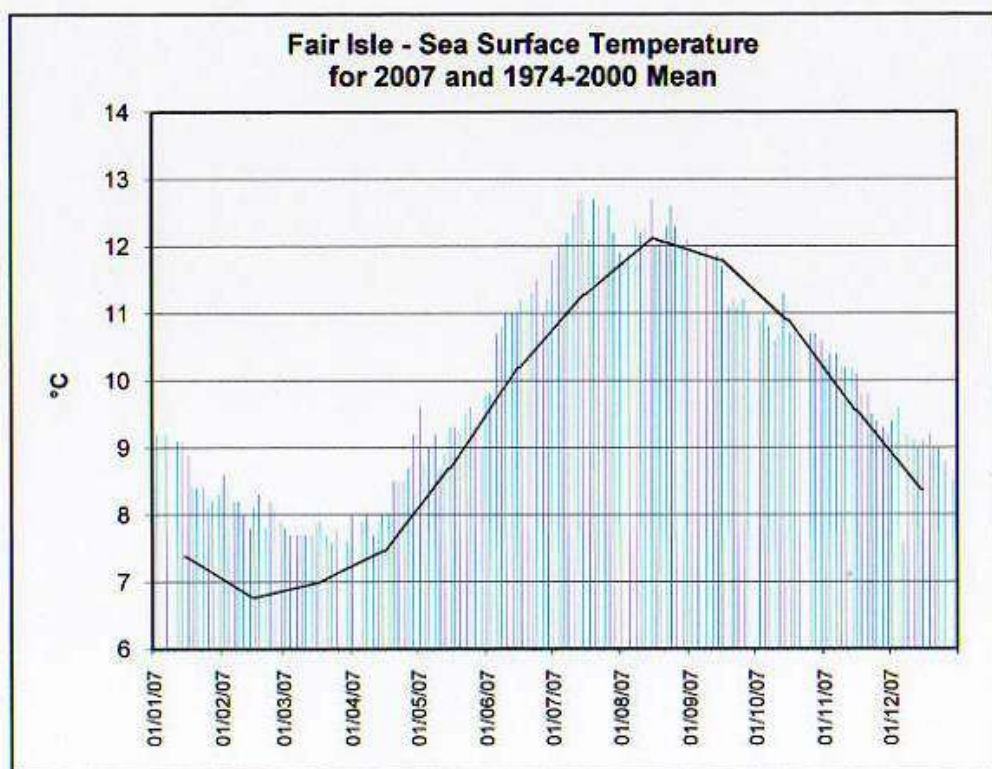
## Shellfish

### Lobsters and the ecosystem

Monitoring continued of the local lobster stocks. It was a most unusual season. Catches were the worst ever in May and June but by August-September that had changed to the best for a long time. The reasons for this are not known. However, there have been marked changes, and anomalies, in sea temperatures in recent years (Dave Wheeler *pers. comm.*) and this may have had an impact on abundance, distribution and availability of the stock. Certainly, it was noted that the sea bed was bare into late spring with the kelp late in growing to provide cover; and “green seas”, a local term for the spring phytoplankton bloom, were observed from the end of March – much earlier than normal.

We already know that seabirds and fish are under pressure. The observations for lobsters, kelp and phytoplankton in 2007 are further signs that the ecosystem is under extreme stress. Every effort is required to restore it to some kind of balance.

Contributed by Iain Stout, Jimmy Stout, Stewart Thomson and Nick Riddiford.



Graph: Fair Isle - Sea Surface Temperature for 2007 and 1974-2000 Mean.  
Courtesy Dave Wheeler, 2008.

Sea temperatures recorded in North Haven during the early part of 2007 were above normal, but during the late summer and autumn they were below normal (see above). Further graphs and analysis of seasonal sea surface temperatures recorded on Fair Isle between 1968 and 2007 are soon to be included in the Marine Database section of the FIMETI website at <http://www.fimeti.org.uk>.

## Rare plants of shingle and rock



Oysterplant at Muckle Uri Geo, Fair Isle.  
Photograph © Rona Burton 2008.

The oysterplant *Mertensia maritima* is a rare and declining plant of Scottish coasts. It colonized Muckle Uri Geo shingle beach in the 1980s and, thanks to concerted conservation action by the Bird Observatory and Fair Isle Rangers, has blossomed into one of the finest colonies in Britain. A count of nearly 200 the previous year in no way prepared us for the explosion of plants in 2007. On 18<sup>th</sup> July 2007, assisted by two IVS workcamp volunteers, we counted 2,600, including 176 medium and large rosettes in full flower. Perhaps “counted” is the wrong word because in some places the plants were so closely packed together that it was difficult to distinguish one plant from another; and, it was easier to estimate the large clusters of tiny plants scattered throughout the enclosure rather than making a direct count.

The total included 151 growing, unprotected, outside the enclosure. All were small and without flowers. Oysterplant is much favoured by sheep, so these are unlikely to survive long term.

The totals can be summarised as follows:

	Small	Medium	Large	<i>TOTALS</i>
Within enclosure	2264	39	137	<i>2440</i>
Outside fence, S side	12			<i>12</i>
Outside fence, E side	41			<i>41</i>
Outside fence, N side	74			<i>74</i>
Outside fence, W	24			<i>24</i>
Cage, west side		1		<i>1</i>
Low cage, N side	6			<i>6</i>
Upturned basket, N side	1	1		<i>2</i>
<i>TOTALS</i>	<i>2422</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>137</i>	<i>2600</i>

### **Key:**

Small = tiny to small rosettes, no flowers

Medium = one or two “trains” of flowers (usually 30-50 cm extent of train)

Large = 50+ cm diameter rosettes with flower trains in all directions like spokes of a wheel.

Two weeks later, visitor Ruth McKenzie, drew attention to oysterplants in Peerie Uri Geo, a small geo immediately east of Muckle Uri Geo, where we had found a handful of plants a few years ago. The shingle part of the geo is divided in two by a rocky ridge. In the western portion I counted 8 small plants and in the eastern part 14. Buoyed by this success I decided to check Sma Geo. To my surprise this geo held no less than 32 plants including one moderate rosette, though not with flowers. The geo has an eastern spur separated from the main geo by a portion of cliff. I believe it is called Hultry Geo. There, a small raised shingle beach supported a further single oysterplant. Again there were no flowers, but the plant was the largest of all found in these overflow sites – a good 30 cm across.

Back in the 1950s Ursula Duncan, a famous lichenologist, reported *Anaptychia ciliaris mamillata* from “near South Light”. Surprise was expressed in later years, because this rare Scottish lichen was not known further north than the banks of the Clyde. A few years ago, I rediscovered her site – a thriving colony in a very restricted part of an extensive outcrop immediately south-east of the Light. In summer 2007 I happened upon some more: a small colony above Swartz Geo, a solitary plant at South Whaleback, a small scattered colony at North Whaleback and another small colony at Goorn. So the plant does occur at other sites on the isle, and South Light is no longer the northernmost UK record! But as at South Light, there is ample exposed rock which seems suitable for the species – yet *Anaptychia ciliaris* remains very restricted and clearly has very specific habitat requirements which I have not yet fathomed.

Contributed by Nick Riddiford

### *Cetaceans on Fair Isle in 2007*



Orcas (Killer Whales), Fair Isle.  
Photograph © Deryk Shaw 2008.  
Courtesy of Fair Isle Bird Observatory.

**March:** Three **Orca** were seen off South Light on 22<sup>nd</sup>.

**April:** Two **Minke Whale** were offshore on 28<sup>th</sup> and a long-dead one drifted into South Harbour on 30<sup>th</sup>.

**May:** A good month for **Orca** sightings and several early **Minke Whales** on 1<sup>st</sup> (2), 3<sup>rd</sup> (5), 4<sup>th</sup> (2) and 9<sup>th</sup> (1). A pod of 5 **Orca** (including one large bull) appeared on the afternoon of 7<sup>th</sup> with 4 (possibly the same pod) seen the following day. Another 2 were spotted on 11<sup>th</sup> and a pod of 5 (different to that on 7<sup>th</sup>) searched the coastline for seals on 12<sup>th</sup>. Presumably one of these pods was seen again off North Light on 17<sup>th</sup>, at least 2 on 20<sup>th</sup> and 5 again on 25<sup>th</sup>. Added to these was a sighting of 2 **Pilot Whales** (female and calf) from a motor boat c 3 miles north of the isle.

**June:** **Orca** were seen around the island on 5<sup>th</sup> (8), 6<sup>th</sup> (6+) (possibly the same group) and 2 females and a calf entered North Haven (right up to the pier!) on 11<sup>th</sup>. A single **Minke Whale** was spotted offshore on 7<sup>th</sup> and another from the *Good Shepherd IV* crossing on 9<sup>th</sup>.

**July:** A quiet month. A pod of five **Orca** cruised past South Light on 6<sup>th</sup>. Single **Harbour Porpoise** on 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> were the only other cetaceans spotted.

**August:** **Harbour Porpoise** were seen on 12<sup>th</sup> (1), 18<sup>th</sup> (10+) and 24<sup>th</sup> (8). A pod of 9 **White-beaked Dolphin** were off Bunes on 28<sup>th</sup>. The only other sightings were **Dolphin sp.** on 10<sup>th</sup> (2) and 22<sup>nd</sup> (3).

**September:** The first **Minke Whales** since June were seen on 19<sup>th</sup> (2) but a pod of 5 **Orca** on 27<sup>th</sup> was the highlight. There were sightings of **Harbour Porpoise** on 10<sup>th</sup> (8), 12<sup>th</sup> (8), 22<sup>nd</sup> (2), 24<sup>th</sup> (6) and 25<sup>th</sup> (3). A **Risso's Dolphin** on 25<sup>th</sup> was the first of the year!!

**October:** A **Minke Whale** on 6<sup>th</sup> was followed with another showy individual in Hesswalls on 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup>. The only other sightings were 2 **White-sided Dolphin** on 9<sup>th</sup> and **Harbour Porpoise** on 19<sup>th</sup> (4) and 22<sup>nd</sup> (5).

Contributed by Deryk Shaw

### *Fair Isle Wildlife Club*



Seashore communities, Fair Isle.  
Photograph © Elizabeth Riddiford 2008.

The Wildlife Club proved popular again in 2007 and included a mix of terrestrial and seashore activities. Trips to the shore took place in March and August and again in January 2008 and revealed a stunning array of marine life – many of which only became apparent only after follow-up scrutiny with a microscope. The observations and findings prompted articles with the titles *Low Tide at North Haven*, *Beasties and Flora of North Haven* and *Winter on the Shore*. Accounts of all the Fair Isle Wildlife Club trips can be found at [www.fairisle.org.uk](http://www.fairisle.org.uk).

Contributed by Nick Riddiford.

## Marine Archaeology

In the following article, Neil Thomson, Anne Sinclair, Stewart Thomson and Nick Riddiford contemplate the conservation needs and recreational opportunities of some of Fair Isle's most famous shipwrecks.

### *Protection*

The investigations of Colin Martin focusing on *El Gran Grifón* in the 1970s prompted considerable diving activities on other wrecks leading to removal of just about all portable, valuable materials. The only exception is *The Canadia*. Efforts to remove the phosphor bronze propeller with an explosive charge resulted in one blade recovered by Simon Martin and Alec Crawford. However, the explosives led to a cliff collapse and the hub, with the other three blades still presumably attached, was buried by the rock fall. It would require considerable equipment and ingenuity to lift. The ship's spare propeller is the one that causes all the excitement. It has attracted attention from divers who have scarred the surface in the mistaken belief that the material was copper. This is because red light penetrates deepest. As the diver returns towards the surface, the "copper" turns to grey. This propeller lies clear of the main wreck having slipped off the aft deck as she foundered. It, too, is four-bladed with one blade missing, the blade breaking off as it hit the rocks on the way down. Since the diving fraternity know there is a broken phosphor bronze propeller still on site and, with the light effect at that depth, every time they go there it is in their mind that, maybe, the sea has washed away the rubble and it is their destiny to raise this prize.

*El Gran Grifón* is protected through legislation but is further safeguarded by a covering of stones which would take a good fortnight just to clear. There is quite a lot of material still on board, including tons of lead shot and an iron gun concreted into a gully wall. Most of the *Canadia* lies on bare rock and is therefore vulnerable. We thought it might be protected under the 1986 Protection of Military Remains Act but apparently not. In that case, in our opinion it should be afforded protection measures.

In summary, trophy hunting has stripped the most portable and valuable assets of nearly all the wrecks so conservation designation, which may have been worthwhile in the past, would probably make little contribution to their protection now. The exceptions are *El Gran Grifón*, already protected, and *The Canadia* which deserves to be so.

### *Recreational diving*

There is huge potential for recreational diving. All the wrecks lie amongst fantastic scenery and provide a range of challenges. *The Canadia* demands a mid to deep dive, down to 45 m (150 feet), and is extremely scenic. Another good dive is to *The Strathbeg*. All dives are to a lesser or greater extent tide dependent and none more so than to *The Black Watch*. Parts of the wreck are at the bottom of some narrow spectacular underwater wells. *The Duncan* lies amongst similar, even more spectacular wells.

In summary, spectacular scenery and varying degrees of difficulty lend great potential to Fair Isle's wrecks as a resource for recreational diving.

### *Natural history interest*

Wrecks are known throughout Britain to attract large concentrations of fish and other marine life. This general concept does not exactly apply to Fair Isle. The entire Fair Isle marine environment is extremely rich and an array of habitats - underwater cliffs and caves, gullies, cracks and crevices, rocky outcrops, sand and gravel plains and dense kelp beds inshore - are equally attractive to sessile and mobile marine life. As a bonus, in sites such as the Baas o' Wirvie there is the strong possibility of interaction with seals. In addition, Fair Isle waters are famous for their unpolluted clarity – clouded only by a prolific burst of plankton during the summer months. The wrecks are the least attractive being stained orange-red from oxidation of the iron.

As an added attraction for divers with a natural history interest, Fair Isle could establish itself as a monitoring site for marine life, through the national *seasearch* network [www.seasearch.org.uk](http://www.seasearch.org.uk).



Stewart Thomson with Echinus, Fair Isle.  
Photograph © Stewart Thomson 2008.



Echinus & Alcyonium digitatum, Fair Isle.  
Photograph © Stewart Thomson 2008.

In summary, the whole of the marine environment around the isle is rich in marine life and the waters unpolluted and crystal clear. There is also potential to establish Fair Isle as a marine life monitoring station within a national network.

### *Accessibility*

Even setting aside the wrecks and natural history values, the spectacular underwater scenery and excellent light penetration are sufficient to make Fair Isle an ideal site for promoting recreational diving. And there are “easy” diving locations. In Furse, the nearest bay to North Haven - at a mere 6 m (20 feet) depth, the diver accesses a sandy bottom with interspersed rocks, underwater caves and rich marine life.

In summary, the all-round experience of wrecks, natural history, water quality and dives to suit all levels makes Fair Isle an ideal site for promoting recreational diving.

### *Code of conduct*

Because of the inherent dangers of poorly prepared excursions, divers are used to respecting a series of rules and regulations pertaining to health and safety. The more rigorous dives on Fair Isle will require a very high level of self-discipline and the input of local knowledge. Fortunately, local knowledge is available on the isle; and, in the past, local residents have advised diving expeditions both by accompanying dives and beforehand. It would be appropriate and sensible, if a recreational diving initiative is created, for a code of conduct to be drawn up which would set out the requirements and precautions necessary to ensure safe, successful diving. Such a code could also incorporate a voluntary scheme to eliminate any trophy collecting or other activities detrimental to the wrecks and their cultural and environmental interests. (*note: divers should already be aware that it is a legal obligation to declare all material obtained to The Receiver of Wrecks*).

In summary, a comprehensive code of conduct covering health and safety, the constraints of local conditions and good practice measures for the protection of heritage and environmental interests should be part of any recreational diving programme. Island participation in the preparation of such a code of conduct is guaranteed - and necessary.

### *Further considerations*

Though several islanders have been active divers in the past, none has been active recently and, though local knowledge is willingly given, there is no guarantee that an islander will be available to accompany visiting divers on a dive. Equipment needs is another facility not currently available on the isle. It is, however, possible for divers to hire a dedicated support vessel from Orkney.

In summary, there are no back-up facilities on the isle so visiting divers should come fully prepared.



Eye o' Kunnis on the west side of Fair Isle.  
Photograph © Rona Burton 2008.

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### **Appendix 1. A letter from Nick Riddiford, FIMETI to Calum Duncan, convener of the Scottish Environment LINK task force**

#### **The case for Nationally Important Marine Areas**

Many thanks for sending me the document *FINDING NIMAS - The case for Nationally Important Marine Areas*. I note that it includes a comment from myself calling for initiatives such as this and, most importantly, seeking recognition of the essential nature of sustainable management in the economic and social well-being of local maritime communities. Your document recognises this too, highlighting the efforts of the Community of Arran Seabed Trust as “giving local communities a voice”.

Despite these brave words, I see that Fair Isle is yet again overlooked in your narrow definition of NIMAs. What do we have to do to get our voice heard? Although I understand the selective approach you have taken, I deplore the omission of Fair Isle in your list. I have undertaken an analysis of why this is so:

- We have a whole suite of species and habitats of international, national and regional importance but in every element, apart from perhaps seabirds where we have the highest diversity of species of any single locality in Europe, there is always one site which has more or is “better”.
- Your criteria completely ignore the human element.

#### **Conservation importance**

Fair Isle seems to be viewed as “second best” as far as marine ecological value is concerned. Yet, if a network is to be established it is important to have representative sites. Fair Isle is representative of a rich ecosystem and, because of its location and size, has a wide range of conservation values, including sitting on the cusp between the Atlantic and the North Sea, with their associated currents and hydro-fronts. Indeed, your map on page 19 shows that Fair Isle sits on the boundary between your Areas 1 (Northern North Sea) and 7 (Scottish Continental Shelf) a situation shared only with Sumburgh Head at the southern tip of Shetland. Fair Isle is a Special Protection Area for its seabirds and, if the conservation objectives of the SPA are to

be achieved (which they are not at the moment!), needs that designation to be extended to the foraging area for these birds – which is the sea. Fair Isle comprises the longest running study site for seabirds, and is a monitoring area for other long-term schemes, including for plankton, meteorology and physical and chemical changes in the surrounding sea: added values for a NIMA! These data demonstrate that the ecosystem is currently under severe pressure, with an apparent interruption to the food chain, and climate change is implicated. Precious conservation time and money will be wasted if this major threat to Scottish marine biodiversity is ignored.

#### *The human element*

If you are going to get NIMAs to work, you will have to get the stakeholders on board. Half the battle is won already on Fair Isle because you have a community whole-heartedly signed up to, and expecting, sustainable management measures to be enacted to safeguard what we consider to be a hugely important value for the isle - environmentally, yes, but also socially and economically. A willing community can act as a spur to wider engagement in a scheme which ought to be tackling biodiversity conservation by including, not excluding, the human factor.

#### *Concluding comments*

I do not wish this letter to appear totally negative. The Fair Isle community is in full support of initiatives such as NIMAs and recognises them as an essential step to conserving the rich biodiversity of Scottish, and UK, waters. However, we are left with the feeling that the initiative is incomplete. There are arguments in favour of recognising the conservation values and the human contribution to protection of marine biodiversity that Fair Isle offers. If the SPA is extended to Fair Isle waters, a step which is long overdue, this would surely promote Fair Isle to a NIMA even within your current narrow criteria. If not, some other system must be put into place which protects our marine environment and recognises the isle's democratic and ethical right to safeguard its own resource. The Fair Isle Marine Environment and Tourism Initiative looks to LINK for vociferous support in achieving this by bringing sustainable management to Fair Isle waters.

Nick Riddiford

Coordinator, FIMETI, 13<sup>th</sup> February 2008

*FIMETI is an initiative of the Fair Isle community in partnership with the Fair Isle Bird Observatory and the National Trust for Scotland*