

# OPERATION SKYE DIVE

Dear All,

*I've sent this e-mail to a lot of people. Apologies if it is not strictly applicable to you, and if so, please ignore it. Please forward it to anybody you know who might fit the bill. Thanks.*

There are seashores of extraordinary biological quality in Skye & Lochalsh that run from the point of Sleat to Drumfearn, from Broadford to the Skye Bridge and from the Plock of Kyle, around Plockton and on to Strome. This long, almost continuous strip of seashore is arguably the most exciting biologically in the Highlands.

## **MAERL and the UK BAP**

A common feature of these Skye & Lochalsh shores and adjacent open waters is the presence of the free-living, unjointed, calcareous red algae we know as maerl (here, mostly *Phymatolithon calcareum*, but requiring closer study).

Maerl is reported to be long-lived and slow-growing. It forms a habitat in its own right and is also the basis of several habitats, exemplified by dominant organisms inhabiting the maerl. All maerl habitats are UK BAP Priority Habitats, but thanks to exploitation and pollution are much reduced in their extent and highly worthy of careful conservation. Maerl beds do not readily or rapidly recover following disruption.

Indications, from personal experience and NBN Gateway distribution maps, show that the three sea lochs of South Skye – Loch Slapin, Loch Eishort and Loch Scavaig – contain patches of all of those maerl habitats plus two more UK BAP Priority Habitats: intertidal boulders and relatively undisturbed deep water muds of various types (with various pennatulids). With six priority habitats, these lochs have to be special and even from the shore, where I can be found routinely at low spring tides, this is more than evident. Over the past few years I've turned up twenty-one species that are not on the NBN maps for north Sleat shores, one of them (rock goby *Gobius paganellus*) apparently never before recorded in the Highlands, but we found it on 16 Oct. this year.

Some of you will have dived off south Skye already and know how wonderful these lochs are, and probably many more of you know them by reputation, or have looked out across them from Tarskavaig, Tokavaig, Ord or Camus Malag or gazed down on them from the Cuillin ridge. I doubt you were underwhelmed!

Recently, the Scottish and Chinese Governments signed an agreement that means Scotland will need twice as many fish farms as at present and Norwegian multi-nationals have swiftly moved into the planning process with huge numbers of proposals for fish farms, including a suite of at least eight they want to install in the south Skye lochs.

- It is well known that fish farms cause environmental degradation (intoxication, eutrophication, sedimentation). Scientific literature, including government advisory, says so.
- It is well known that we have numerous special ecological treasures in south Skye lochs and maerl is a (are) key species.
- Species and habitats in these lochs are inadequately recorded and mapped.
- Therefore, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) does not have adequate information with which to pass judgement – and, of course, they're overloaded with applications.
- The government and the statutory authorities (SNH, SEPA, Marine Scotland) that might protect wild places from industrial pollution respectively lack the will and the teeth to protect Scottish lochs from long-term ecological damage by fish farming.

- Countering fish farm planning applications with valid environmental arguments (there are several more, which other people are trying to tackle) would be a lot easier if we had better ecological information.
- Planning is already well under way, so ideally that information is needed now. The need for comprehensive biological data is urgent.

## **DIVER-BIOLOGISTS SOUGHT**

The people of south Skye are asking for voluntary assistance from people who have the biological and technical skills to help us survey the most important sites in Lochs Slapin and Eishort (perhaps Scavaig too, certainly the Sound of Soay ... so much to do). The community of Sleat (the south Skye peninsula) has the will to protest against fish farms but lacks every resource the big companies have in spades: money, lawyers, experience, strategies, employees, company cars, political clout etc. So, unless we can raise some funding – we intend to try – we can offer volunteers nothing but hospitality. Happily, that is plentiful. So if willing divers can make their way to Skye, they can be put up and well fed during their stay.

In January 2006 I was visited here by maerl specialist Dr Nick Kamenos (ex-Millport, now Glasgow), who I took to the Plock of Kyle so that he could snorkel around the maerl beds. That seemed to work, so if we choose decent low tides, surveying might not be too deep and difficult, and aqualungs a non-essential luxury. Meanwhile, we have a notion that we can borrow a boat and cruise around the lochs with glass-bottomed buckets, getting a rough idea where the maerl beds are.

Do you think our predicament inspires any of you to get together and visit Skye to help us fend off the fish farm big guys? Do you know of other sub-aqua biologists who would join in? It would be marvellous if, as a diverse co-operative, we could produce some really good data to help the likes of SNH deal with unreasonable bids to take over and potentially wreck our precious land/seascape.

## **TIMING**

I'm afraid our need for assistance is urgent. The first we knew of any of this was less than a month ago and we've never done anything like this before, so we've had to learn the whole business from scratch. The first planning application from Marine Harvest already has gone beyond the consultation stage (2 Nov.) so we are now awaiting a verdict. Even if that is rejected, the next company (Hjaltland) has already begun 'screening and scoping' that includes the same site (!) plus two-three others nearby. They are in position, ready to pounce. Then we will really need to have data ready to present to the authorities, competent material they're not expecting mere locals to have in their armoury. That could be only a matter of months away, meaning we probably can't wait even till next summer. Ideally, we should get surveys under way in the New Year when, unfortunately, it will be a bit chilly – a dry suit and cocoa job. Can't be helped. 11-15th January is looking good for middle of the day low tides.

Thank you for considering this call for help. I've attached an essay about the problem I wrote for our MSP (includes a brief author's biog.) and a poster that shows Loch Eishort (maerl with seagrass) with a Photoshopped-in fish farm, and illustrating a few of its best qualities. If interested, you'll find a download link to the PowerPoint show I put together for our first community-informing meeting, bottom-left at [www.merryweathers.org.uk](http://www.merryweathers.org.uk). Before long I hope we'll have a website where we can keep people informed about progress.

Best wishes,

James.

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Dr James Merryweather