



Dolphin Watch Newsletter

Ceredigion Coast and Countryside News

Spring/Summer 2006



Janet Baxter

Since Dolphin Watch started in 1994,

an enormous amount of data has been recorded about where and how the bottlenose dolphins of Cardigan Bay use the inshore coastal waters off Ceredigion.

The popularity of the scheme seems to be as great as ever, as observer effort in 2004 & 2005 was higher than in any previous year. The Coast & Countryside Section of Ceredigion County Council originally started the Dolphin Watch scheme at 3 sites along the Marine Heritage Coast, but now with the help of staff and volunteers from the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales, Sea Watch Foundation, Friends of Cardigan Bay and the Cardigan Bay Marine Wildlife Centre, six sites are being monitored, including the new sites at Castle Rocks, Aberystwyth, and New Quay harbour. Over the last two summers, an amazing 1038 watches were carried out, 2028 hours of observation were recorded and one hundred and nine observers took part in the survey. This makes a grand total of 7313 hours of observing dolphins and their behaviour since the scheme began.

We have just completed the analysis of the 2004 and 2005 data, and there are some interesting findings. If you would like a copy of the full report, please let me know.

Liz Allan

Conservation Management Officer

What is Dolphin Watch?

It's a unique project. Local communities have invoked it and the scheme has involved hundreds of volunteer observers - it's driven by people's love and enthusiasm for the wildlife of Cardigan Bay. The information recorded has documented the importance of the Ceredigion coastline for bottlenose dolphins, providing Ceredigion County Council and the Countryside Council for Wales, the basis upon which to manage boat activities and to safeguard coastal habitats. Twelve consecutive years' data make it one of the longest running marine mammal studies in the UK and it's allowing us to monitor longer-term changes in habitat use by dolphins.



Chris Pierpoint, independent marine researcher and co-author of "Cetacean Site Use and Boat Traffic on the Marine Heritage Coast 1994-1999"

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Where are the dolphins most frequently seen?

Dolphin presence at the study sites

Mwnt

Since 2001 Mwnt has been the leading site in terms of dolphin occurrence. In 2004 & 2005 the proportion of watches in which dolphins were seen was higher than ever, a staggering 73% and 81% respectively. Good years and a great location for dolphin-watching.

Aberporth

2004 was a particularly good year at Aberporth also, with dolphins recorded in 54% of watches. A sighting rate of 33% in 2005 was similar to previous seasons but still higher than most.

Ynys Lochtyn

Ynys Lochtyn proved another excellent location for finding bottlenose dolphins. Dolphins were seen in 52% and 57% of watches respectively during the 2004 and 2005 surveys.

New Quay

In 2004 we had the first opportunity to directly compare the adjacent Bird's Rock and New Quay Harbour study sites. Sighting rates at the harbour were very high, as expected: dolphins were seen in 61% of watches there in 2004. Data from 2005 will shortly be available for analysis also. Dolphins were less frequently seen at Bird's Rock: in 2004 the sighting rate was 39%; in 2005 this fell to 29%. These figures continued a puzzling decline in sightings from Bird's Rock compared with the mid and late 1990s.

Aberystwyth

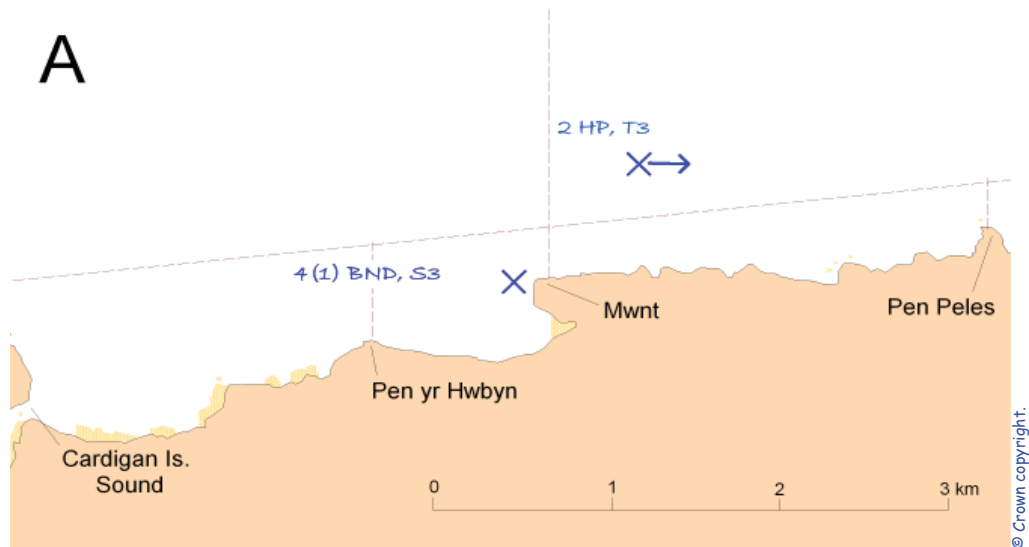
Sighting rates were lower at Castle Rocks than at other sites, highlighting in fact, the importance of coastal habitats for bottlenose dolphins further south between New Quay and Cardigan. Dolphins were seen close to Aberystwyth harbour, once only in 2004 and on four occasions in 2005.



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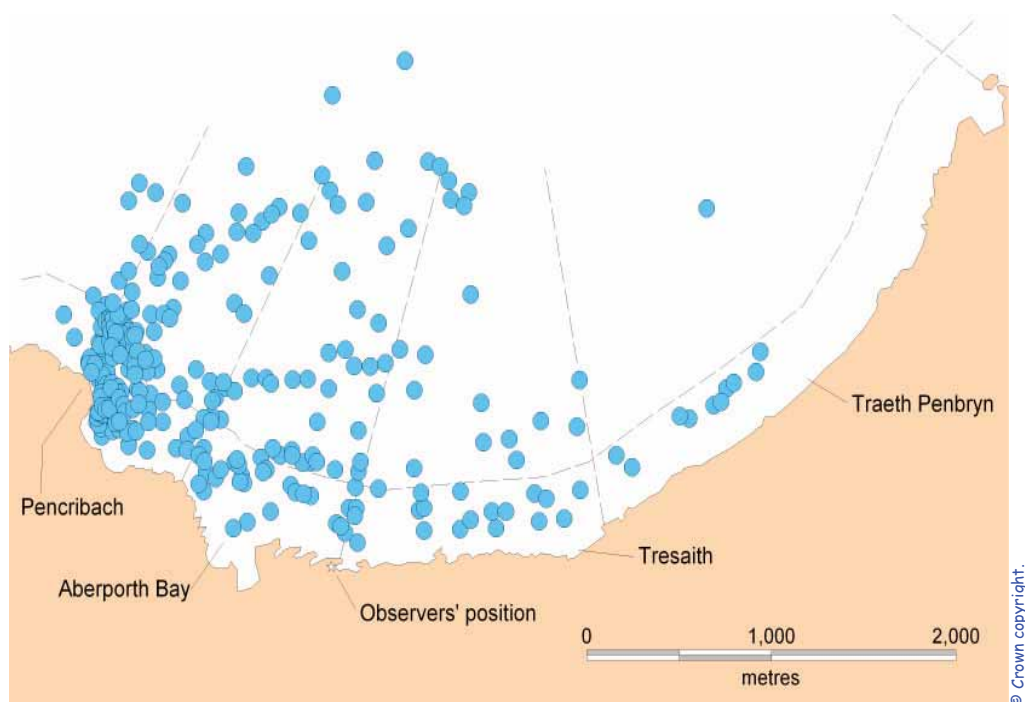
Map plotting confirms the importance of sites as "hot-spots"

In summer 2004 we introduced two new recording forms; a data form & a map sheet. This proved quite popular and began to provide us with some very useful additional information. The use of maps gives us information on how dolphins use various parts of each site.



The map above records during the first fifteen minutes of a 2hour watch at Mwnt, 4 bottlenose dolphins including a calf staying and diving around the headland whilst two Harbour Porpoises travel rapidly up the coast towards Aberporth

Total bottlenose dolphin sightings at Aberporth, in 2004 & 2005. The location of dolphin groups at the beginning of each 15 min interval is marked with a dot.



SURVEY RESULTS – 2004 AND 2005

A major part of the Dolphin Watch study has been to learn more about how boat users behave around dolphins and where boating activity is taking place.

717 encounters between bottlenose dolphins and boats were recorded during the summers of 2004 and 2005. We defined an encounter as being an occasion when boat and dolphin came within 300 m of each other. The type of boat that had the highest number of encounters with the animals the most were motor boats and visitor passenger boats, which represented 32% and 28% of all boat encounters respectively. Encounters were also reported for speedboats, water skiers, boats under sail, canoes, commercial fishing boats, research vessels, canoes, personal water-craft (jet skis) and other types of craft.

The rates at which dolphin-boat encounters were recorded at each site were as follows:

	Boat encounters	Encounters / hour
NQ Harbour	394	0.71
Ynys Lochtyn	59	0.38
Mwnt	110	0.26
NQ Bird's Rock	95	0.21
Aberporth	50	0.15
Aberystwyth	9	0.08
	717	0.35

It is evident from the frequency, with which dolphins encounter boats of various sorts, that the two share the most popular spots. We have found no evidence previously that high levels of boat traffic reduce sighting rates for dolphins.

Is the Code of conduct working?

Ceredigion County Council was one of the first coastal Local Authorities in the UK to introduce a voluntary Marine Code of Conduct as part of its work with the Marine Heritage Coast. The Code of Conduct was introduced in 1993 in order to ensure that boat users and dolphins could co-exist happily along this important stretch of coastline in the southern part of the County. Four years later, the skippers of the visitor passenger boats in New Quay and Aberaeron introduced a code of conduct for their wildlife boat trips. During our surveys we have recorded several aspects of boat-dolphin interactions. We record the type of boats involved, whether they pass within 50 m of a dolphin group and the number of other boats within a 300m radius of the animals at the time. This information helps us to



SURVEY RESULTS – 2004 AND 2005

understand any changes in dolphin behaviour that we observe. In 2004 - 05 we also recorded the boat driver's behaviour, with regard to their compliance with the code of conduct.

The results are encouraging. The proportion of boat encounters that did follow the code of conduct is shown below for each of our six sites.

	<i>Boat encounters</i>	<i>Compliance with Code of Conduct</i>
NQ Harbour	394	94 %
Ynys Lochtyn	56	80 %
Mwnt	106	82 %
NQ Bird's Rock	93	91 %
Aberporth	48	81 %
Aberystwyth	9	78 %

A high proportion of boat encounters clearly took place in accordance with the code of conduct: at New Quay Harbour for example, 94% of 394 boats were recorded as having followed the code during encounters with bottlenose dolphins. Results from Bird's Rock were similarly high. However, although fewer encounters occurred at Ynys Lochtyn, Mwnt and Aberporth approximately 20% of these encounters failed to follow the code.

Variation between boat types

Visitor passenger boat skippers exemplary but still more work to be done with speedboat and personal water-craft users

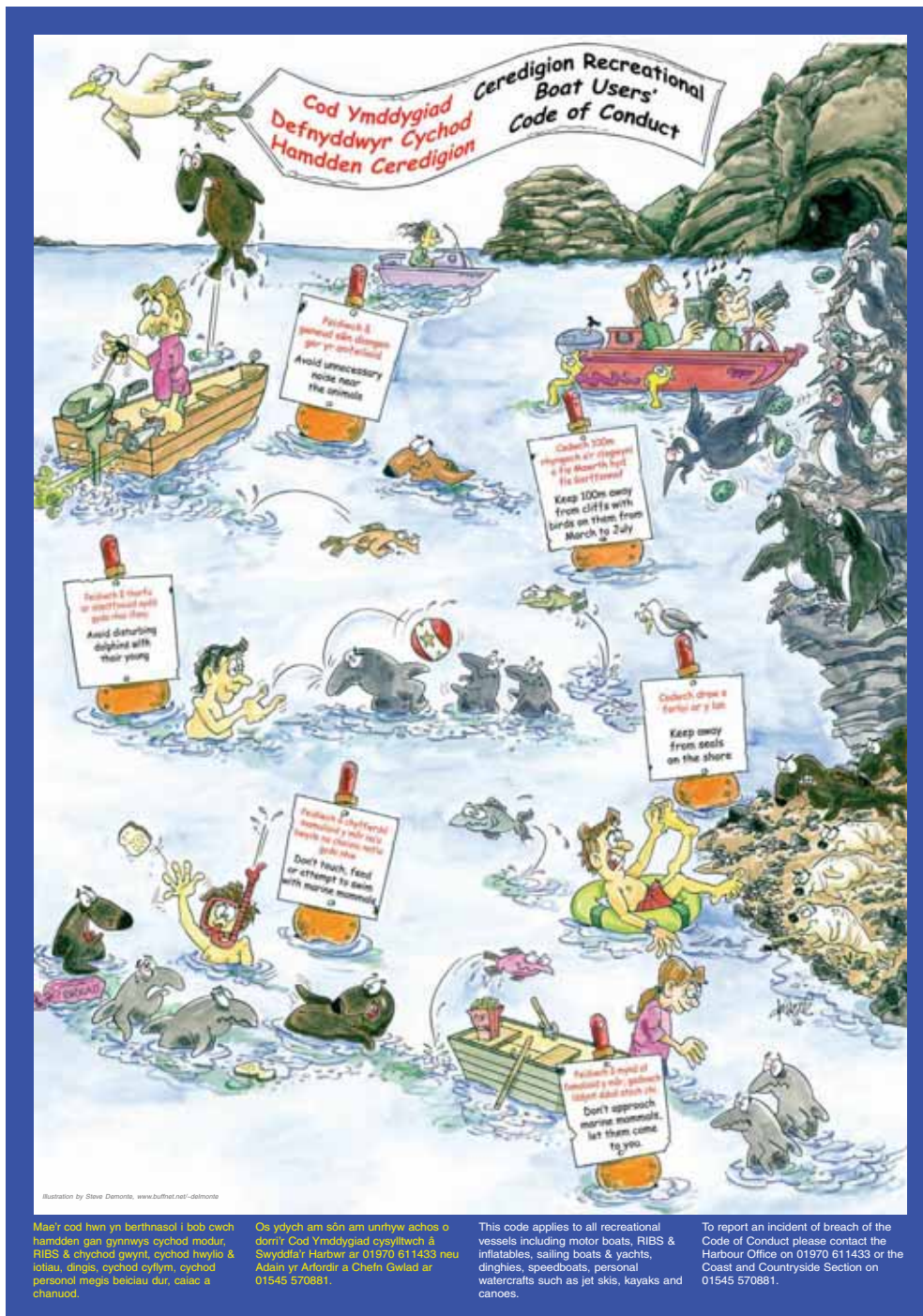
It is clear from the data that the boats most frequently offending were boats that habitually travel at high speeds: speedboats (41% non-compliance), speedboats with water skiers (57%) and jet skis (40%). In contrast, for visitor passenger boats we recorded a whopping 98% compliance with the code during a total of 198 encounters. The trip boat skippers are to be commended for their continued respect for the code, and for showing such a good example to the rest of the Bay's boat users.



The challenge of influencing boat behaviour at sea goes on ...

Code of Conduct Gets Revamp

Over the years, we have displayed the code at various venues and in a variety of formats, such as signs at launch points, tide table booklets, and boat user guides. During the last year, we felt it was time to take a completely fresh look at how we communicate the important messages of the code to skippers and boat users.



Mae'r cod hwn yn berthnasol i bob cwech hamdden gan gynnwys cychod modur, RIBS & chychod gwynnt, cychod hwylio & lotiau, dings, cychod cylfwm, cychod personol megis beiciau dur, caiaic a chanuod.

Os ydych chi am sôn am unrhyw achos o dorri'r Cod Ymddygiad eysylltwech â Swyddfa'r Harbwr ar 01970 611433 neu Adain yr Arfordir a Chefn Gwlad ar 01545 570881.

This code applies to all recreational vessels including motor boats, RIBS & inflatables, sailing boats & yachts, dinghies, speedboats, personal watercrafts such as jet skis, kayaks and canoes.

To report an incident of breach of the Code of Conduct please contact the Harbour Office on 01970 611433 or the Coast and Countryside Section on 01545 570881.

Annalisa Bianchessi, who joined the Coast and Countryside Section last year as the Cardigan Bay SAC officer, launched herself eagerly into the task, bringing with her valuable previous experience gained from working with the Whale & Dolphin Conservation

Society on the development of a campaign to raise awareness about the endangered common dolphin in the Mediterranean sea. **The result? Come and see for yourself**

Make the Most of your Experience at Sea

Visit the Cardigan Bay Boat Place



An exciting new development this year is the opening of an information centre for skippers and boat users of Cardigan Bay. Packed with interesting and innovative displays, boat users can discover more about the wildlife of Cardigan Bay and how to make the most of their experience at sea. Information about the Dolphin Watch monitoring and data results is also on display. Dolphin watch volunteers can also make use of the Boat Place when it's raining as the centre is conveniently based in Council owned premises on the pier at New Quay! These were renovated last year to form a public display area and office space for the Ceredigion Coastcare officer, Richard Thomas, and Liz Allan and Annalisa Bianchessi from the Coast & Countryside Section. The Boat Place will be open Friday to Monday 12noon - 6pm from May to September.

We are looking for volunteers to help with the running of the Boat Place this season, so if you think you would like to get involved, please get in touch.

Keeping an eye on Birds Rock New video link installed



The old coastguard hut at Birds Rock, near New Quay was renovated a few years ago to become the Cardigan Bay Lookout. It's a great spot not only to observe the most important seabird-breeding colony in the County, but also to watch Atlantic Grey Seals dolphins and porpoises. Now visitors to the Cardigan Bay Boat Place will also be able catch a bit of the action at Birds Rock, as a video link has been installed between the two sites. We are looking forward to seeing a hive of bird activity on the ledges this breeding season, as well as plenty of sightings of marine mammals. A visit to the Boat Place is a definite must-do this summer!

Thank-you

- To all the many observers who give their time so generously
- To the local site co-ordinators for ensuring the watches go so smoothly: Lizzie Wilberforce; Ruth Harding; Roy Evans; Penny Sharp, Helen Bates, Lorraine Hill and Janet Baxter
- To Chris Pierpoint for the design of the data forms/ maps and his many hours of analysis
- To the Wildlife Trust for South and West Wales, Seawatch Foundation, Friends of Cardigan Bay and the Cardigan Bay Marine Wildlife Centre for all their interest and involvement
- To the Crown Estate Marine Stewardship Fund for their vision and financial support of the restoration of the Cardigan Bay Lookout and the development of the Cardigan Bay Boat Place
- To the Countryside Council for Wales for their financial support towards Dolphin Watch

And finally

- To all those boat skippers who follow the Code of Conduct and for doing their bit to protect Cardigan Bay.



Coast & Countryside Section,
Department of Environmental Services & Housing,
Ceredigion County Council, Penmorfa, Aberaeron, SA46 9PJ
01545 572142, liza@ceredigion.gov.uk



Cyngor Cefn Gwlad Cymru
Countryside Council for Wales