



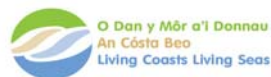
Coastal and Marine Resources Centre

Ionad Acmhanní Cósta is Mara

## Awareness and Appreciation of the Coastal Environment in County Fingal



Report completed for Fingal County Council as part of the  
Living Coast – Living Sea Project,  
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*Unless otherwise stated all images used in this report were taken by Cathal O'Mahony and Dr. Tom Doyle of the Coastal and Marine Resources Centre – UCC. Photographs included in the questionnaire were kindly provided by Fingal County Council.*

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report details a study undertaken as part of the Living Coast-Living Sea INTERREG IIIA project. The objective of the study was to inform Fingal County Council of the level of awareness and appreciation of the coastal and marine environment that exists in the local community; such insights can contribute to the optimal use of Fingal County Council's resources when focusing on the preparation of relevant materials for effective interaction with members of the general public.

The research methodology comprised the use of a questionnaire survey coupled with a series of focus group meetings. Both components of the methodology – questionnaire survey and focus groups – involved the participation of members of the general public. The content of the questionnaire was designed to provide information on: 1) the level of awareness and appreciation of the coastal environment in County Fingal; 2) what elements of the coastal environment are appealing in terms of further information; and, 3) how this information should be imparted. The outputs of the questionnaire survey provided direction and a framework for the focus group meetings. The questionnaire survey also provided an opportunity for enlisting individuals interesting in contributing to the focus group discussions. A separate questionnaire was designed for visitors to the Howth Head area.

A key finding to emerge from the questionnaire survey relates to the **use of language and terminology** when interacting with members of the public. In preparing the questionnaire content, efforts were made to ensure that the language used came across as being straightforward and jargon free. However, it was evident that members of the public and scientists/conservationists differed in their interpretation and understanding of certain terms/phrases (e.g. protection – physical or legal; habitat –local environment versus global examples; rare species – rarely seen or rare because of reduced/threatened population). This issue also emerged during all the focus group discussions, with obvious differences in interpretation becoming apparent.

The responses received from members of the public indicated that topics such as **Birds, Rare Species, Mammals and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)** were most popular in terms of additional information. In terms of potential options for dissemination of information on Fingal's coastal sites and wildlife of importance, the majority of respondents preferred three forms of media: **a dedicated Website; a local Newsletter; and, Signs / Interpretation Panels.**

The trends to emerge from the questionnaire survey were incorporated into the framework for discussion during the focus group meetings – though the content of the focus group was not limited to the scope of the questionnaire. All those present at the focus group meetings **demonstrated pride and interest in their local coastal area** – though the reasons for interest ranged from **biodiversity / wildlife, amenity value to cultural history and heritage.** Issues addressed through the focus groups included: **negative aspects and threats to the local coastal environment; awareness of SACs; regulation and management of SAC sites; terminology; and content and style of preferred media for dissemination of information on the coastal environment.**

The focus group meetings and questionnaire surveys revealed a number of challenges to be faced in terms of interacting with the public to raise awareness and appreciation of Fingal's coastal environment, e.g. **how to convey the message of conservation, perceptions regarding impact of activities, roles of responsibility and implications of statutory/European ecological designations.** However, there was a clear interest in wanting to learn more about the coastal environment of County Fingal and in contributing the preservation and improvement of its ecological integrity. Whilst many participants in the study confessed to being not fully aware of the national and international significance of parts of Fingal's coastal environment they demonstrated a clear desire to know **what is special about their local area, their SAC, particular bird/animal, and what makes their coastal resource so unique.**

## **BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES**

The Living Coast – Living Sea project is a partnership project between Fingal County Council in Ireland and Gwynedd County Council in Wales and is co-funded under the ERDF INTERREG IIIA Ireland-Wales programme. The aim of the project is to raise awareness of the ecological and recreational value of the marine and coastal environments of Fingal and Gwynedd by means of a comprehensive educational and awareness programme that shall be developed for both counties. The project will act as a pilot scheme for both Wales and Ireland regarding the creation of an educational programme on the coastal and marine environment for Local Authorities and other regional organisations.

The coast of Fingal is of considerable nature conservation value. The estuaries of Baldoyle, Broadmeadow and Rogerstown are visited by significant numbers of migratory birds (Gault et al., 2007). The islands off the Fingal coast and Howth Head are important breeding areas for seabirds (Birdwatch Ireland, 2007). The estuaries, the islands, and parts of Howth Head have been designated as Special areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs) under the EU Habitats Directive and EU Birds Directive respectively. In order to ensure ongoing and long-term protection of designated sites and the coastal environment in general, it is important that all stakeholders (statutory and non-statutory) are aware of the reasons why these areas are important and how their activities impact upon the nature conservation value of these coastal sites.

The Living Coast – Living Sea project aims to raise awareness of the eight SAC and SPA areas and the wider coastal environment of Fingal through various means (e.g. an educational programme for schools, interpretation panels, and dissemination materials). To provide direction and input in the design of an educational and awareness raising programme it is necessary to have information on the current levels of awareness amongst local citizens with respect to: 1) ecologically designated areas and species; and, 2) the wider coastal and marine environment of Fingal in general.

In June 2007, Fingal County Council issued a tender to assess levels of awareness and appreciation for the purpose of trying to identify what type(s) of information the Council should supply, the type of information people would like to receive and the most effective media of presenting this information on coastal habitats, species and designated sites. Fingal County Council would also like to identify whether the EU SAC or SPA designation is something people know about or want to know more about. Research was therefore commissioned by the Council with the following overriding objective:

*“To inform Fingal County Council of the level of awareness and appreciation of the coastal and marine environment that exists in the local community, so that they are able to focus their resources on the subjects/media where it is most effective”*

## **METHODOLOGY**

Two different methods were chosen to gather information on the level of awareness and appreciation of the coastal and marine environments in Fingal. Firstly, a questionnaire survey (see Appendix 1) was carried out to determine what level of awareness existed regarding Fingal's coastal environment, i.e. ascertain what coastal features (species / habitats) were readily recognisable, assess people's perceptions on conservation, what people would like to know more about, and how they would like to receive such information. The questionnaire comprised one page of short questions that were either simple 'yes/no' or 'tick the relevant box' type answers. Two questions included the use of visual aids where respondents were asked to identify key species and habitats (Questions 7 and 8). One question (Question 11) presented twelve options to the participants and asked them to list their top three preferences.

Additionally, a second questionnaire survey was carried out in Howth to assess the opinions of tourists that visit this popular destination (Appendix 2). This questionnaire was aimed at obtaining information regarding the use and awareness of Howth's coastal pathway and how it could be improved. Both questionnaires were designed to be completed in a short period of time (i.e. it took between 10 and 40 minutes to complete a survey, depending on the amount of input a respondent was prepared to give; many participants relaxed after the initial period of contact and gradually became more willing to provide expanded answers to the survey questions).

Potential participants (of either questionnaire) were approached by the interviewer and asked would they like to partake in a very short questionnaire on how they use and interact with their coastal environment. Securing initial contact with respondents was perhaps the most difficult part of the survey methodology – with factors such as disinterest, apathy, time constraints and perception of requests for money all influencing people's willingness to stop and answer the questionnaire. Coupling the request with statements such as *"your input will help inform the County Council of your interests and may even influence issues you are unhappy about"* proved to be generally

effective. It is also important to note that each interviewer wore an identification badge that was very visible and presented to the potential interviewer. Once a participant had agreed to partake in the survey, the interviewer gave a brief outline to the purpose and content of the questionnaire and proceeded to work through all the questions, moving on once the respondent indicated satisfaction with their reply. Surveys were carried out in three sites: Skerries (Red Island area); Malahide; and, Portmarnock (along the beach and coastal pathway).

The questionnaire survey of local residents was complemented by the hosting of three focus groups in Portmarnock (19/07/07), Malahide (01/08/07) and Skerries (17/07/07). As well as providing potential participants for the focus group meetings, the information collected from the questionnaire surveys provided direction and a framework for the structuring of the focus groups.

Focus groups are a technique used to identify issues of most concern for a community or group. They allow people to answer questions, but also to bounce ideas off one another, and hence provide more detailed information as people share and elaborate on their issues (Gibbs, 1997; McNamara, 2006; Beaufort Research Ltd., 2006). For the purposes of this study in Fingal, focus groups allowed for an in-depth exploration of the opinion and reaction of local residents and provided the opportunity to show examples of the area's habitats and species to stimulate discussion. Each focus group meeting was structured around a similar framework of questions.

All focus groups participants were local residents and were recruited from respondents to the questionnaire, through word of mouth or the use of networks. The groups comprised participants from different age classes, life stages, and backgrounds to ensure that there was ample representation of different social groups. In total, 16 individuals participated in the research (five in Skerries, five in Malahide and six in Portmarnock). Each focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes and all respondents were given a small token of appreciation (€20 book voucher) for their time and effort.

### **Format of data**

The format of data varied depending on the type of question put forward. For example, when gathering demographic data it was thought more appropriate to ask the participants what 'age bracket' they belonged too rather than directly asking them for their age. In comparison, when asking participants if they could correctly identify the following species (using visual aids) it was decided that the answer should be classified into one of three categories, i.e. assigned a value of '1' if they correctly identified the species by its common name, a value of '0.5' if they recognised the species but could not provide its name (e.g. "*oh that's the bird you get out on Rockabill*"), and a value of '0' if they didn't recognise the species at all.

Alternatively, when asking participants what information about their coasts they would like to know more about, it was decided that a value of '1' would be assigned to any of the topics (listed on the questionnaire) selected. For example, one respondent said that they would like to know more about 'Birds', 'Rare species' and 'Mammals', so all of these topics were appointed a value of '1', whereas all other topics listed received a value of '0'. When all participants were questioned each topic could then be given a total tally by adding up all the '1's and '0's.

However, when collating information on how participants would like to be informed about such topics, each participant was asked to select their top three forms of media in order of preference. Their first preference was assigned a value of '3', second preference was assigned a value of '2', and third preference a value of '1'. In this way, the data could be analysed in different ways, e.g. a tally of 1<sup>st</sup> preferences or a tally of the total score when all 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> preferences were combined.

## DETAILED FINDINGS

### Questionnaire Survey Results

#### Demographic profile of respondents

The questionnaire respondents (n = 70) comprised the following categories of age groups: 14 (20-34 yrs); 15 (35-44); 16 (45-54); 17 (55-65); 8 (65+). 48 of the respondents stated they had children.

#### Use of the coastal area

57 out of 70 participants visited the coast (either beach or coastal pathways) greater than once a week. Most participants actually walked sections of the coast almost every day. The main reasons given for coastal walking were: fresh air; leisure; exercise; reflection; walking the dog; daily routine; relaxation; to socialise; enjoyment of sea views; and for healthy living. However, some participants visited the coast for different reasons, including swimming, visiting the playgrounds, and sailing.

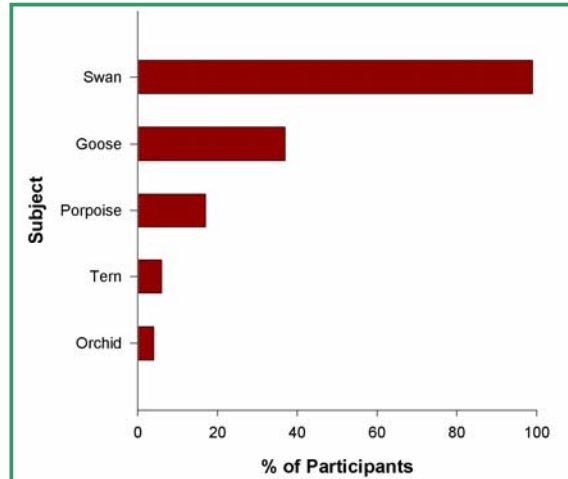


**Figure 1.** Paved coastal walkway along Fingal coast.

#### Recognition of flagship species

When shown a picture card of different flagship species that occur in the coastal areas, less than 6% of participants (n = 4) correctly identified the Roseate Tern, and only 37% (n = 26) correctly identified the Brent Goose. Only 4% (n = 3) correctly identified the Pyramidal Orchid, and 17% (n = 12) the Harbour porpoise. However, a number of participants actually said they recognised the species or Family shown

and were aware of its occurrence in Fingal but could not think of its name (e.g. *“it’s a goose I think, but not sure what kind”* or *“it’s a tern, the fella you get on the island...”*). For example, although 37% of participants correctly identified the Brent goose a further 21% (n = 15) of participants were familiar with the goose image but could not assign a species name to it. Similarly 11% (n=8), 13% (n=9), and 10% (n=7) of participants did the same for the orchid, tern and porpoise. Almost 100% (n = 69) of participants correctly identified the Swan (Fig. 2).



**Figure 2.** Percentage of participants who correctly identified the species shown to them on a picture card (Mute swan, Brent goose, Harbour porpoise, Roseate tern and the Pyramidal orchid). Participants were scored ‘1’ for a positive ID and ‘0’ for a negative ID. Participants were given a value of ‘0.5’ if they knew the family but not the species name.

### **Awareness of habitats and their protection**

When shown picture cards of different habitats, many respondents expressed uncertainty in their response to the question: *‘which of the following habitats do you think are protected [because of their wildlife]?’* The general response was to say *“yes”* to most habitats, but when pressed to elaborate, most respondents demonstrated limited awareness of the reasons behind the ecological designation. Indeed, the perception was that *‘protection’* meant some kind of **barrier** to keep people out, i.e. a fence deployed around a sand dune system with no understanding of why the fence was erected. For example, a typical conversation related to this question would go as follows:

Respondent: *“Yes I think the sand dunes are protected, I guess so, wouldn’t you think so?”*

Researcher: *“Why you would say so?”*

Respondent: *“I’m not really sure; I suppose to stop people walking there.”*

With the exception of one respondent no reference was made to wildlife or the EU Habitats Directive (however one respondent did mention the EU Habitats Directive and the fact that Irish waters are a sanctuary for whale and dolphins).

However, perhaps the most pertinent finding of this question relates to the use of language and terminology when interacting with members of the public. In preparing the questionnaire content, efforts were made to ensure that the language used came across as being straightforward and jargon free. However, some scientific terms were retained, which created difficulties during some parts of the questionnaire survey. For example, difficulty originated in the use of the term 'habitat' – a term that is familiar to the general public (e.g. media use of the term), yet in reality is a term that is probably little understood and not always easily definable by non-specialists. Most persons have some idea of what a habitat is, and may even reply "*a rain forest*" as an example; however, they have more difficulty in applying this same concept to their local environment. Thus, interpretation of key terms can be significant when discussing aspects of conservation with a non-specialist audience. As a result, during the questionnaire survey, if a participant was showing obvious signs of uneasiness (typified by loss of interest in the survey) the researchers did not pursue the question much deeper.

### **Information on their coasts that respondents would like to know more about**

93% of respondents stated that they would like to know more about their coast. When asked '*which of the following would you like to know more about?*', 36% of respondents wanted to know more about *Birds*, 26% about *Rare Species*, 24% about *Mammals*, and 24% about *Special Areas of Conservation* (Fig. 3). *Plants*, *Fish*, *Islands* and *Geology* were the next most requested topics (20, 19, 19, and 17% respectively). Interestingly, only 10% suggested *Dunes* and *Estuaries* as topics that they would like to know more about. Some other responses that fell outside the categories included:

- “Would like to know more about why the local dunes at Portmarnock are protected and how it works”

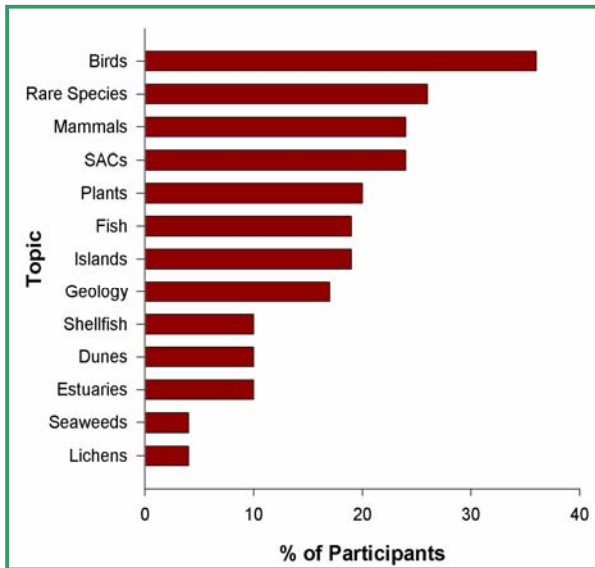


Figure 3. Categories of coastal topics for which participants would like to receive more further information.

- “Fisheries activity off the coast, and information about water quality”
- “Impact of humans on habitats”
- “More information about our coastal heritage, like the BBC programme *Coast*”
- “General background information about all of the above”

### Preferred media to raise awareness of SACs and wildlife

In terms of potential options for dissemination of information on Fingal’s coastal SACs / SPAs and wildlife, the majority of respondents preferred three forms of media: a dedicated Website; a local Newsletter; and, Signs / Interpretation Panels. This is made very clear when you consider the first preferences of respondents as shown in Fig. 4 - 39% of respondents chose option of a Website, 26% for a Newsletter, and 17% selected Signs/Interpretation Panels.

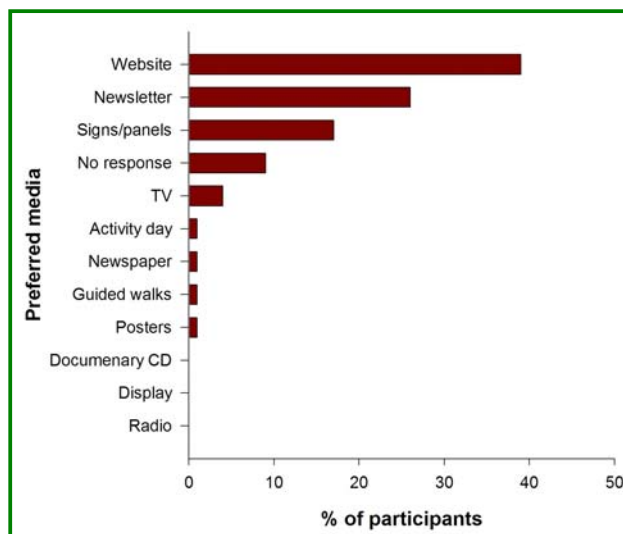


Figure 4. The preferred media preference (only 1<sup>st</sup> preferences included) through which participants would like to be informed about wildlife.

## **Focus Group Findings**

### **Local opinion about the coastal environment**

All those present at the focus group meetings demonstrated pride and interest in their local coastal area – though the reasons for interest ranged from biodiversity / wildlife, amenity value to cultural history and heritage. All spoke of *“spectacular unspoilt scenery”*, *“a great amenity”* or a resource that caters for many types of recreation (e.g. coastal walking, sailing, swimming), *“its accessibility”* (i.e. it’s on your doorstep), and an *“immeasurable benefit to their livelihoods”*. The following selected key quotes provide an indication of the level local pride expressed by focus group participants:

- *“Nicest beach I’ve ever seen – our beach, the dunes and that are the nicest beach I’ve ever been to in any country – the sand dunes, you wouldn’t see that anywhere – I’ve never seen it in another country anyway that I’ve gone to.”*
- *“Appreciation of what we have – what is in our back garden [the coast] can never be built on.”*
- *“It’s just so special.”*
- *“Looking out there [the sea], you wouldn’t get it anywhere – and its constantly changing – I’ve never seen anything else like it and I would never ever move.”*
- *“When we were growing up you had this notion that you didn’t have a holiday until you went to the seaside - when we moved to Malahide that feeling stays with you.”*
- *“Beaches – different habitats – that’s the key, the variety from estuaries and dunes, rock pools, huge variety of different habitats, and that delivers an awful lot – so much different wildlife within a small area.”*
- *“All of it immediately available, accessible and it’s on our doorstep.”*
- *“Anyone who doesn’t live in the area and comes out to the area on the weekend, thinks the area is beautiful and would love to live in it – we actually have something special and we need to make sure we look after it.”*

It is worth noting that few participants spoke about wildlife [unprompted] and how it contributed to their well being. Indeed, the following quote from one participant

goes some way in substantiating this observation: *"If I hadn't met you on the beach the other day I would have never even considered the wildlife – me neither [another respondent]."*

### **Negative aspects and threats to the coastal environment**

Across all three focus groups, respondents felt that litter, sewage, and lack of parking were issues that should be addressed. Additionally, there was a growing concern amongst participants that the amount of development (e.g. housing) in the area may exacerbate some of the aforementioned issues. One group spoke strongly against the expansion and relocation of Dublin and Drogheda Ports (to near Skerries), they are fearful of what these changes may bring to their environment. Some key quotes from this section of focus group discussions included:

- *"Litter and pollution, bins around Head are missing / were removed"*
- *"Too much glass in dunes [broken bottles]."*
- *"Lack of dog (fouling) control"*
- *"Marine debris in winter is bad – lots of material washed up on beach."*
- *"[New] treatment centre for sewage will ruin beaches – why should Fingal import sewage?"*
- *"We've lost our Blue Flag because of an overflow from Swords that comes into our estuary."*
- *"Sewage in the sea is bad."*
- *"People coming out for a day don't know if parking will be available – not catering for people who want to use the environment, or people who want to use the beach with their kids."*
- *"Parking and traffic management is terrible."*
- *"Hideous recent building and development, and too much housing."*
- *"Ongoing development – housing puts pressure on the sewerage system."*
- *"Housing going up – but no infrastructure."*

Other participant comments that reflected opinion on negative aspects related to use, or constraint(s) to use, of the coastal environment included:

- *“Poor public toilet facilities.”*
- *“If you could safely walk the Baldoyle Road it would be great – a safe pedestrian route – link to Sutton and other areas.”*
- *“Every one of our beaches in north Co. Dublin has two golf links on it – every single one of the beaches has been taken over – biggest damage to coast because they take it [the coast] over.”*
- *“Loss of identity as a country town and loss of community identity.”*
- *“Odour and smells from harbour – no idea what is behind smell.”*
- *“Springboards and dive platforms not cleaned and are unsafe.”*
- *“Lack of cycling routes - cycle route around coast would be lovely – a good idea.”*
- *“Jet skis – there are bye-laws – but who enforces them.”*

The respondents also considered coastal erosion, changes in tidal flow due to construction, sewage, radiation from Sellafield, illegal dumping and future developments around the coastline as threats to the natural coastal environment.

### **Awareness of Special Areas of Conservation**

Across all focus groups there was very little awareness of the term Special Area of Conservation (SAC), and what it implied. Indeed, a number of respondents misunderstood its meaning as protection of local monuments/historic buildings. The general perception of SACs was that they are a site that is protected by law, and where people are not allowed to enter, and where human activity is limited. Many participants felt that having an area designated as an SAC implied: 1) access is restricted; or 2) access should be restricted. There was little mention of wildlife with people focusing more on the practicalities (i.e. *“a place we can not visit or build on”*). The following statements from focus group participants reflect general interpretations of what is meant by having an area designated as an SAC.

- *“Well maintained and looked after – and monitored.”*
- *“Preserved and you shouldn’t go there – leave it alone, shouldn’t disturb it.”*

- *“Means it’s been a sort of bird sanctuary for a while and you don’t want to disturb the area in case they move off – where Brent Geese are.”*
- *“We’ve been told our estuary is a Special Area of Conservation, we have it rammed down our throat morning noon and night when we’re trying to get things built - we just know that it’s an area that has certain conditions attached to it – that’s my understanding of it – because of whatever is living in it.”*
- *“Can’t interfere – it’s protected by law.”*
- *“For teenagers conservation could mean a lot of things - you need to spell it out – you cannot use 4x4s and so on.”*
- *“I don’t understand how the Council can say this [estuary] is a Special Area of Conservation and then built a motorway at one end of it.”*

Almost all focus group participants had never heard of the Habitats Directive or Natura sites (one respondent who was a very keen naturalist had knowledge of these subjects). Similarly, most focus group participants stated that they found all the different designations very confusing, i.e. SACs, Nature Reserves, SPAS, Blue Flag beaches, etc. For example, one respondent said: *“[there are] so many balls in the air [regarding different designations] I just find it hard to get it all straight in my head at times.”*

In order to facilitate further discussion on SACs, the focus group audiences were given a short explanation on the history of SACs, their evolution in Ireland, and the origin of term. This stimulated additional discussion on the topic with participants agreeing that protecting wildlife is essential and is something that needs to be pursued here in Ireland. Participants indicated that they (and most people they know) were unaware of the international importance attributed to habitats and species protected by SAC designation; it was felt that this international aspect related to the rainforest of the Amazon, etc. and not to local circumstances. Most respondents felt that there was no need for alternative wording to the term SAC, but felt the term required further explanation when used and made more transparent to audiences, particularly children.

*"No [there is no need for alternative wording] but [you] need to spell out why [an area is a Special Area of Conservation], especially for children."*

When asked *"where do you think SACs are located in Fingal"*, most focus group participants were able to list one or two sites that had some form of designation (SAC or SPA). However, there was a surprising lack of awareness regarding Rockabill as an important protected area for Roseate terns, even from participants within the Skerries focus group who would live in close proximity to the location. Similarly, Baldoyle and Broadmeadow SACs did not feature strongly in the response from focus group participants.

### **Management awareness of Special Areas of Conservation**

When respondents were asked who is responsible for managing SACs (i.e. areas of significant importance for wildlife and ecology), it was clear that there is a general lack of awareness or misconceptions of who manages and designates SACs. In fact most respondents identified the County Council as the authority responsible for such management and protection. One respondent suggested that it would be good to have *"a family tree of who's in charge of what"* – this is relevant to the earlier comments regarding uncertainty with the range of designations linked to the coastal environment. The following are some responses from focus group participants to the question *"who is responsible for managing SACs?"*

- *"Local County Council [is responsible]."*
- *"People who live in the area - if everybody in Fingal did their little bit not to damage the dunes or disturb the geese or whatever."*
- *"RSPCA [is responsible for protecting the fauna]."*
- *"They [those responsible] don't know themselves."*
- *"Fingal County Council - I would think is responsible for overseeing the parks and over the roads."*
- *"The manager [County]."*
- *"I'm unsure; I would like clear definitions myself about who is responsible."*
- *"Minister for the Environment?"*

Most respondents were very surprised after being told that National Parks and Wildlife Services (of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government) are charged with the management and protection of SACs. Most had never heard of NPWS and if they had, they weren't sure what their exact role comprised with some participants presuming they looked after National Parks only. Additional comments to arise from the discussions on this topic included:

- *"One recognisable agency is required, they are there, and they are helpful, and they want to talk to you about the area – I have never met anyone, in say, Malahide, that would come up to you and say [give info on natural heritage of the area], it is not promoted, this amenity, this National Parks and Wildlife Service – I've never heard of it – which is appalling."*
- *"Name [NPWS] is too long, and has nothing to do with special amenity areas, SACs, coasts and features."*
- *"Does it have to be part of a protected area for the NPWS to be involved, can it be part of a Green Belt?"*
- *"No one knows of park rangers – they're not visible. I would like to see a Yogi Bear type figure, like [those seen] in America, who is very visible and approachable"*
- *"Volunteers could be used, people who are interested and knowledgeable – people are retiring earlier and earlier – they might be interested."*
- *"NPWS don't seem to have a voice in government."*
- *"Can NPWS require local authorities to clean [SAC] areas?"*
- *"Lobby TDs to change the laws [in order to] designate local authorities to manage these SAC areas with the funding required."*

### **The use of terminology**

There was general consensus amongst respondents regarding the use of terminology; most felt no need for terms such as flora and fauna, when flowers and animals will do, e.g. *"instead of fauna and flora – why don't we just say plants and animals – [it's all] very Latin."* Interestingly, a number of participants interpreted rare species as

meaning “*something that you don’t see too often*” like a fox or an otter, rather than meaning an animal or plant that occurs in very low numbers and is listed as rare or endangered. Furthermore, many terms like ‘habitat’ and ‘biodiversity’ are very familiar to the participants as they are used regularly in the media, however, their exact understanding of these terms is limited as most people never think about it.

### **What would respondents like to know more about and why?**

As established from the questionnaire survey, most people would like to know more about Birds, Rare Species, Mammals and SACs (Fig. 3). Focus group participants were asked if they concurred with these findings (all did) and what exactly they would like to know about these topics. On the latter point, there was much variation between groups and participants but in general, other than the main topics such as birds and rare species, it was very difficult to extract much further detail. This response may originate from difficulty experienced by the participants in saying what they would like to know about when they are not fully informed or know very little about that subject in the first instance. Indeed, one respondent did mention lichens as something they would like to know more about, but because the individual knew almost nothing about lichens, they found it difficult to phrase or convey what type of information they wished to receive. The participant even went so far to suggest that “*perhaps we should be given more information about topics such as lichens that we know little about, rather than topics that we are more familiar with*”. This was the case for many other respondents when pressed to expand on their suggestion of what they would like to know more about. For example, one respondent suggested ‘Birds’ but when prompted what would you like to know about them was unsure and said “*everything*”. This was problematic for the chair of the focus groups as any further prompting would certainly bias the results. However, one overriding response was that the respondents would like to know **what is special about their local area**, their SAC, particular bird/animal, and what makes it so unique. For example, participants stated:

*“What’s fascinating to hear about, is that we [our coastal area] are so special – that we have half the population of certain species and the largest of others, that’s incredible, we should be so proud of that – it’s marvellous to have that.”*

*“You’d like to know the importance of them [species and habitats] because if you know the importance of something then you will preserve them yourself – you will get involved in that area – what dangers there are, what causes these things [species] difficulties – how can we help decrease these dangers, for example bottle tops could be a problem – then we could work with shop owners and the public and would look at alternatives and practical solutions.”*

### **Content of website and newsletter**

As it was established from the questionnaire survey that respondents would like to be informed about wildlife and SACs via a website, newsletter, and more signs/interpretation panels the researchers directed their efforts towards gathering information on exactly what kind of information or content focus group participants would like included in such media. Again the response was varied but a good sense of what is required can be gleaned from the following synopsis of comments – many of which are relevant to the previous sections dealing with uncertainty and unawareness regarding coastal environments and biodiversity.

A website/newsletter should include *“lots of photos/illustrations/maps”* and information and articles about: *“on any one thing on the seashore – like the seaweeds”*; *“well written humorous pieces about the wildlife”*; *“explanations of local phenomena (e.g. phosphorescence)”*; *“on why the marsh [or anything else] is protected”*; *“why an area is an SAC and what can we do to help protect it”*; *“local sightings, i.e. a report of a rare fish caught by an angler off Skerries or a rare bird seen in Malahide”*; *“wider interest [topics] such as geology and archaeology”*.

The chosen media should also encourage *“contributions from schools”* and have *“crosswords with little prizes”*. Overall the website/newsletter should *“focus on good*

*news, the delight and the wonder – and basic practical information” such as “water quality” and “what are the threats and dangers [to the local wildlife] – how can we help to decrease or avoid these dangers/threats”.*

When participants were asked how often they would like a newsletter to be distributed, respondents suggested that *“every three months”, or “a seasonal delivery would suffice”*. However, again there were differences between groups and participants:

- *“Don’t think people can get enough of it to be honest, Portmarnock parish newsletter has a little column that two women write – just little snippets, but very well written humorous pieces about the wildlife, it’s enormously popular – they’ve hit an angle – they make it so it’s so much fun and people are learning and dying to get more of it.”*
- *“It would want to go out every month but would the Council fund it for every month, or would it be every quarter, or twice a year – every month is unrealistic.”*
- *“Quarterly distribution would allow you to tie it into the seasons – like to see it as primarily a good news thing – not about climate change or politicians selling themselves – focus on the good news, the delight and the wonder – and basic practical information.”*
- *“Church newsletter, these two women who swim in the area, write about the estuary and the birds, comes out about once a month I think, it’s brilliant – done with humour as well - this information would be good on a website.”*
- *It should be issued “in such a way that you could collect it in a binder, attractive to collect, Issue 1, Issue 2, and so on.”*

### **Content of signs/interpretation panels**

There were mixed opinions amongst focus group participants towards signage, with one respondent saying that *“signs are boring [with] just too much irrelevant information [it’s] overload [and] it wasn’t interesting, didn’t do it for me”*, whereas another said that *“currents signs are great but more are needed.”* However, when considering the overall response from the focus groups, many participants were broadly in agreement with

the latter sentiments. Discussions on signage resulted in the following comments from focus group participants:

- *“More information on items of interest other than birds – fish / flora.”*
- *“Ensure that signs are well maintained and protected from vandalism.”*
- *“Tailor content to local not general area.”*
- *“Allow users of the area to quickly identify what they have seen or will see.”*
- *“Location is important – walks around head, harbour and Red Island.”*
- *“Could change information with seasons [like newsletters].”*
- *“Need to be creative and interactive” and “need more [boards].”*
- *“Include the key facts.”*
- *“Too many birds on it [the signs].”*
- *“Maps of islands with information on islands.”*
- *“A numbered trail with an inexpensive black and white handbook would be great – for families and children.”*

### **Contribution of locals to newsletter or website**

Respondents were generally open to this idea but were unsure exactly how it would work and what they would include as a contribution. While within each focus group the participants indicated a willingness to contribute in some manner, a level of uneasiness and a lack of confidence were evident when committing to contribute to media for public consumption. Comments from focus group participants on this topic included:

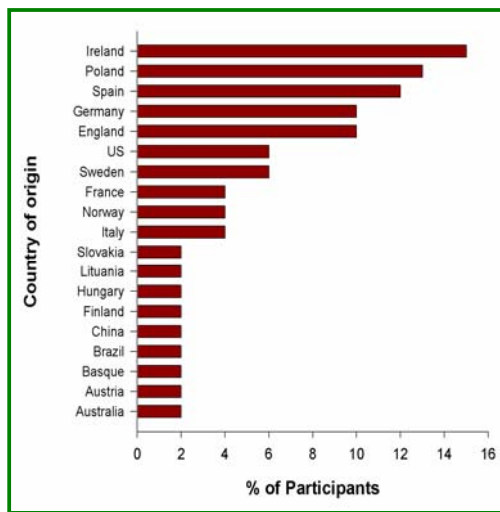
- *“People would like to contribute if they could, wouldn’t have knowledge initially to contribute to what is a scholarly area.”*
- *“Put out a task to people – how many hedgehogs have you seen – people respond to that kind of thing.”*
- *“Sighting scheme or nature watch type of thing, get people involved, [and] name this bird and so on.”*

## Howth Questionnaire Survey Findings

### Howth Survey Results

#### Profile of respondents

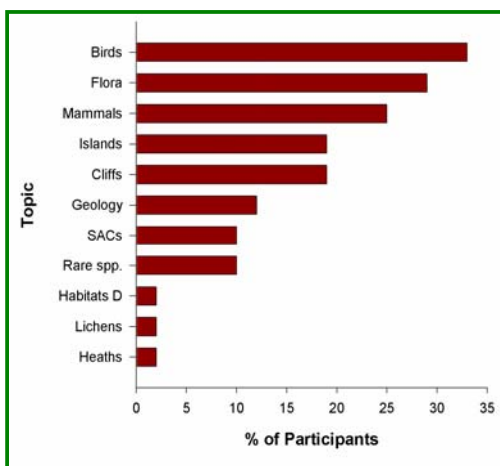
The Howth questionnaire survey focused on visitors to the area – this sample of 52 visitors included international and Irish (not resident to the North County Dublin area) individuals (Fig. 5). Polish, Spanish, Germans, and English made up the vast majority of visitors if Irish participants were excluded. In terms of demographics, the questionnaire respondents comprised the following categories of age groups:



42% (of participants were aged between 20-34 yrs); 17% (35-44); 15% (45-54); 6% (55-65); and 4% (65+) (note: 15% gave 'no response').

Figure 5. The country of origin of persons who participated in the Howth surveys.

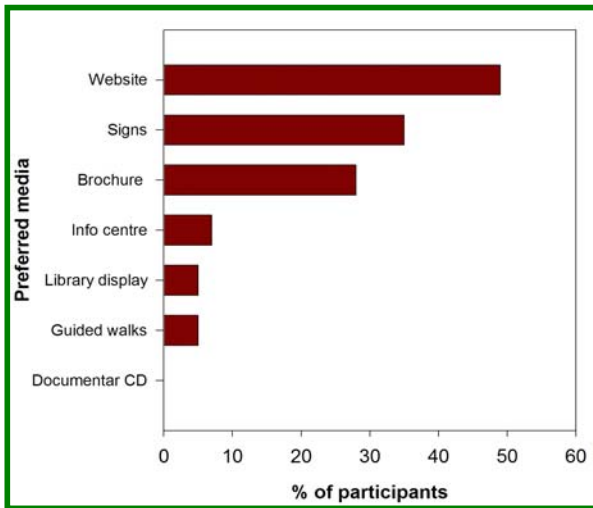
#### Topics of interest and preferred media



In terms of preferred topics that visitors would like to know more about, the top three were Birds (~33%), Flora (~28%), and [Marine] Mammals (~25%) (Fig. 6).

Figure 6. Information that participants in the Howth survey would like to know more about.

When asked about how they would like to receive information on the chosen topics, the preferred medium was a website (~49% of those surveyed) (Fig. 7).



Signs/interpretation panels were second choice with ~35% of participants choosing this option. An information centre was third choice, returning 7% of responses. Although not given as choice in the questionnaire a number of respondents (30%) proposed the use of a brochure / leaflet.

**Figure 7.** The preferred media through which visitors would like to be informed about Howth Head SAC and coastal walk.  
**Note:** Brochure was suggested by ~30% of participants yet it wasn't specified on the questionnaire.

### How do you think the Howth Head SAC could be improved

Visitors were asked to offer opinion and suggestion on how the Howth Head SAC and coastal walk could be improved. Responses included the following:

- *"It would be nice if there were some marks on stones [waypoints] indicating direction of different walks i.e. red walk, blue walk, green walk."*
- *"Some viewfinders would be nice."*
- *"It would be great if there was a choice of walks such as a 1 hr, 2 hr, and 4 hr walk that are clearly signposted and colour coded."*
- *"More directional signs indicating distance are needed."*
- *"Info signs on birds should be near where the birds can be seen and not placed at the other end of the walk."*
- *"More signs with information about location of the walk and what you are likely to see."*
- *"[More] information notifying that area is an SAC."*
- *"More bins and less rubbish."*

## KEY CONCLUSIONS

- In terms of **awareness** of Fingal's coastal environment, the majority of study participants (questionnaire surveys and focus groups) were not familiar with: the key (flagship) scientific species; the national and international importance of certain species and habitats; the implications of a site having a European ecological designation; and how sites of significant conservation and ecological value are managed.
- In terms of **appreciation**, all study participants expressed high levels of pride and interest in Fingal's coastal environment – reasons ranged from recreation and amenity value, cultural and historic aspects, interaction with nature, and general contribution to lifestyle. The general consensus of participants in the study was they would appreciate further information on the coastal environment of Fingal.
- Regarding **dissemination** – format and content – the results of the study show a website, local newsletter, and additional signs/interpretation panels to be the preferred methods for circulating information on Fingal's coastal environment; whereas the content should focus on what is special about the local area, the SAC, particular bird/animal, and what makes Fingal's coastal resource(s) so unique.
- Opinion varied amongst participants regarding specific details on the language to be used when conveying conservation / ecology information to a non-specialist audience. **Terminology emerged as a key issue** to be addressed in the preparation of any dissemination materials.

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**APPENDIX 1 – QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY (PORTMARNOCK, MALAHIDE AND SKERRIES)**

**QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY**

<b>Location:</b>	<b>Number:</b>
<b>Date:</b>	<b>Time:</b>

**Q1 Do you live locally?**

Yes  No

\_\_\_\_\_ (Where approx?)

**Q2 Age group?** (Circle appropriate age group)

<19, 20-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-65, 65+

**Q3**

**Gender** \_\_\_\_\_

**Q4 Do you have children?**

Yes  No

**Q5 How often do you visit the coast?**

> Once a week  Every few months

Weekly  Less often

Monthly

**Q6 What are the main reasons for your visit to the coast?**

- Holidays / recreation
- Work
- Rowing/kayaking
- Boating (RIB/Power boat)
- Jet skiing
- Sailing (In board)
- Swimming
- Scuba diving
- Bird watching
- Coastal walks
- Education (Field Trips)
- Duck feeding
- Other  \_\_\_\_\_

**Q7 Do you recognise the following species?**



**Q8 Which of the following habitats do you think are protected?**



**Q9 Would you like you know more about your coast?**

Yes  No

(If 'No', end and thank)

**Q10 What would you like to know more about?**

- Fish
- Plants/trees/flowers
- Mammals (foxes, porpoise)
- Birds (geese, terns)
- Seaweeds
- Shellfish/crustaceans
- Dunes
- Estuaries
- Geology (fossils/formation)
- Islands
- Lichens
- Rare species
- Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Q11 How would you like to be informed about such information? (List top three)**

- Community Newsletter (regular)
- Internet/website
- Signs/interpretation panels
- Posters & Leaflets
- Guided walks
- Radio
- Newspapers
- Activity Day/events
- Display in local library
- Documentary video/CD
- TV
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Q12 We are holding a focus group to discuss the findings of this survey and find out people's views about their local coastline. (Max 1 ½ hours/ held locally/ venue / no preparation necessary / token of appreciation offered)**

**We would be interested in your views. Would you like to attend?**

Yes  No

**Q13 What time would suit for you to attend?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Q14 Contact name and number:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX 2 – QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY (HOWTH)**

**QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY**

Location:	Number:
Date:	Time:

**Q1** What county/country are you from?

\_\_\_\_\_

**Q2** Age group? (Circle appropriate age group)

<19, 20-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-65, 65+

**Q3**

Gender \_\_\_\_\_

**Q4** How did you hear about Howth?

Guidebook

Word of mouth (i.e. friend)

Internet/website

If website, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Did you find it easy to get information on this area?**

Yes  No

**Q5** What are the main reasons for your visit?

Holidays (recreation)

Work

Site seeing

Boating/sailing

Fishing (angling)

Bird watching

Coastal walks (hiking)

Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Q6** Did you walk a section/s of the Howth Coastal Walk?

Yes  No

(If 'No' go to Q9)

**Q7** What was the highlight of the walk?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Q8** Was it easy to locate the beginning of the walk?

Yes  No

If 'No' please elaborate:

\_\_\_\_\_

**Q9** Do you know that the Howth Coastal Area (cliffs, Howth Head etc) is a Special Area of Conservation (SAC)? (Outline why)

Yes  No

**Q10** As a tourist/visitor, would you like you know more about the coastal environment of Howth?

Yes  No

(If 'No' go to Q12)

**Q11** What would you like to know more about?

Flora (plants/maritime flowers)

Marine mammals (seals, porpoise)

Birds (esp. seabirds)

Dry heaths (Annex I Habitat)

Cliffs (Annex I Habitat)

Geology (formation)

Islands

Lichens

Rare species (plants and animals)

Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)

EU Habitats Directive

Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Q12** How would you like to be informed about such information? (List top three)

Internet/website

Signs/interpretation panels

Information centre

Guided walks

Display in local library

Documentary video/CD

Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Q13** How do you think we could improve the Howth SAC?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_