

Public understanding of the marine environment

**A report from the conference at
The Resource Centre, London
18th January 2005**

By Olive Heffernan

A ONE-DAY CONFERENCE AIMED AT RAISING PUBLIC AWARENESS of the marine environment took place on January 18th at the Resource Centre, London. Although the event was UK-focused, the aim was to identify how we can communicate our messages to the public more effectively, a theme of relevance on a European and indeed global scale across many disciplines. The event was attended by approximately 80 participants and took the form of a series of short presentations followed by workshops to collate and develop ideas.

Prior to the conference, attendees completed a survey on their perceived benefits of increased public understanding of the marine environment. The conference opened with a presentation of the pre-conference survey results, which focused attention on the varying perspectives of the aims of public outreach and education programmes.

John Joyce (Irish Marine Institute) spoke on the importance of approach in pitching science stories to the media. Jonathan Potts (National Maritime Museum, UK) highlighted the role of flagship venues in raising public interest in the marine environment, including its physical, biological, historical and cultural components. A CD-based educational resource on the coastal marine environment being developed by Peter Wright (Portsmouth University) for schoolchildren was a noteworthy example of how technology and creativity can be interwoven for educational purposes.

A presentation from the Welsh Biodiversity Partnership (WBP) provided insight into the logistics of organising and running a public events programme in the form of Welsh Biodiversity Week (Emily Dicks, WBP). The issue of going beyond raising awareness to encouraging public participation was addressed in talks on changing consumer behaviour (Bernadette Clarke, Marine Conservation Society), regional Beach Warden initiatives (Dee Christensen, Nature Coast Project), collaborative initiatives such as the Sealife Signpost currently being developed under *MarLIN* (Guy Baker), and the Wildlife Trusts' Marine Champions initiative (Jolyon Chesworth, Wildlife Trust). Overall, this session gave a broad overview of types of public outreach resources and events being developed in the UK, many of which are relevant to the objectives of the MarBEF outreach programme.



Irish Wildlife Trust (www.iwt.ie)
Touchpool: a popular educational tool.

Of specific relevance are the public participation events, which can provide guidelines for our own ambitions to initiate a coastal monitoring project with amateurs and students under the MarBEF banner. In the coming year, the MarBEF outreach programme will also develop online resources for schoolchildren. The initiatives presented at this conference provided insight into approaches that are being currently used and developed to engage the public, and particularly children, thus preventing us from reinventing the wheel.



For the first workshop session, small teams discussed how we could take forward public understanding of the marine environment in very broad and general terms. Specific issues, such as identifying target audiences, were identified from this session and tackled in breakout groups during the afternoon workshop. Workshop discussions were regulated by conference participants who were trained the previous day in facilitation techniques. This approach was extremely useful in assisting discussions and was implemented by the UK-based consultancy Dialogue Matters, which specialises in facilitating negotiations between environmental stakeholder groups.

One of the main outcomes from the conference was the formation of a working group, which will meet in April to discuss how best to carry the work and suggestions forward. Time to view posters and exhibitions, to exchange outreach material and to meet other participants was built into the workshop.

This thought-provoking event was funded by The Wildlife Trusts and English Nature (through DEFRA's Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund). For further information, contact the event organiser Lisa Browning of the Wildlife Trusts' South East Marine Programme at lisab@hwt.org.uk •

Relevant links

The Wildlife Trusts' South East Marine Programme

<http://www.southeastmarine.org.uk>

English Nature

<http://www.english-nature.org.uk>

DEFRA Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/waste/aggregates/>

Olive Heffernan

MarBEF Communications and Outreach Officer, Ecological Consultancy Services (Ecoserve) Ltd, B19 KCR Industrial Estate, Kimmage, Dublin 12, Ireland.
Email: olive@ecoserve.ie