

# Big sea survey highlights importance of citizen scientists

April 26 2013

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A rare stalked jellyfish and an invasive sea-squirt are among the hundreds of species that have been identified by volunteers taking part in a major research project along the North East coast.

The Big Sea Survey was launched three years ago by experts at Newcastle University to log flora and fauna along a 150 mile stretch of coastline from St Abbs to Saltburn.

Recruiting 357 'citizen scientists', the [project](#) was developed to provide an up-to-date record of [marine organisms](#), a baseline against which we can better understand the impact of climate change and other environmental and anthropogenic factors.

Funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the research will be presented to volunteers, key stakeholders and marine organisations at an event today

at Newcastle University.

BAFTA award-winning television producer Martha Holmes, who has worked with the BBC's natural history unit on key wildlife documentaries such as *The Blue Planet* with Sir David Attenborough, will also be there to give a keynote speech about the value of [citizen science](#).

Dr Jane Delany, project lead based at Newcastle University's Dove Marine Laboratory, said this was a huge undertaking where public enthusiasm for the project far exceeded their initial expectations.

"The response from our [citizen scientists](#) has been tremendous," she says. "The records collected will contribute to national databases of marine species and allow us to build a better understanding of how our seas function.

"The success of this project reflects the recognition by a wide section of society that responsibility for seas and our natural heritage belongs to us all. Volunteers have a very important role to play in helping scientists and governments monitor the effects of pollution and climate change on the environment."

There were two key aims to the project; to produce an up-to-date record of marine intertidal species records along the north-east coast that will feed into management strategies and provide the baseline for detecting environmental change, and to raise awareness of marine issues.

As part of a major three year research project into the ecology of our coasts, the volunteers collected records of the abundances of species, looked at the communities of animals living in kelp forests, and also investigated the timing of seasonal events such as the arrival of marine larvae on our shores.

As well as recording common species, the volunteers also identified some new creatures roaming our shores that have been previously undetected in the North East.

"One of the most exciting finds was a population of stalked jellyfish," says project officer Dr Heather Sugden.

"Before now we have spotted the odd one along our coast but they have always been considered to be extremely rare. However, this survey threw up a population of 190 of them living off the coast at Beadnell."

The team also recorded an invasive species of tunicate – *Corella eumyota*. "This is a type of sea squirt and can potentially be very damaging," explains Dr Sugden. "It's quite an aggressive [species](#) that tends to smother things, such as sinking lobster pots, so it's one to keep an eye on and we wouldn't have known it was there without this project. This is the first time it has been recorded in open natural habitats in the region."

Newcastle University Deputy Vice-Chancellor Professor Ella Ritchie adds: "This project demonstrates the importance of public involvement in driving forward research.

"A project like this could not happen without the support of our volunteers and I hope they have also enjoyed the experience."

Provided by Newcastle University

Citation: Big sea survey highlights importance of citizen scientists (2013, April 26) retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-04-big-sea-survey-highlights-importance.html>

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