

PRESS RELEASE

DATE: 17 November 2019

TRACKING OF JUVENILE SEALS A FIRST FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

A novel marine research project is using the latest technology to record and understand harbour seals' behaviour. The Exploris Aquarium has teamed up with University College Cork as part of the EU funded, Loughs Agency led, SeaMonitor project to tag the female rehabilitated seals, affectionately known as Ariel and Merida, prior to their release on Sunday from Knockinelder Beach, Co Down.

Although seal pups have been rehabilitated and released by Exploris since 1989, this is the first time they have been tracked following release to give scientists a better understanding of how they fair post-release. Dr Mark Jessopp, the lead scientist from University College Cork, explains **“we use state-of-the-art tags glued to the seals' fur which drop off naturally during the seal's annual moult, but until then provide information on where the seals are going as well as their dive behaviour. This gives us unique insights into post-rehabilitation survival and how juvenile seals learn to forage successfully in the wild”**. It is hoped that the data will be used to inform better management and protection for harbour seals.

It's the first release of rehabilitated seals this season from Exploris Aquarium, NI's only seal rehabilitated facility, with more releases to come. **“On average we take in about two dozen seals every year.”**, says Exploris Curator, Peter Williams, **“Seals are a protected species here in the UK and Europe so at Exploris we take in seal pups from all over the Northern Irish coast that have succumb to illness or have been affected by human interference and as a result abandoned by their mothers.”**

Loughs Agency CEO, Sharon McMahon, explained: **“This is an especially exciting time as the seals are the first species to be monitored since the project launched earlier this year. The Agency is proud to be leading the way alongside expert colleagues from statutory and academic institutions and a range of stakeholders that will ultimately produce dynamic management plans for some of our most important and vulnerable species.”**

Discussing the importance of this work Gina McIntyre, CEO of the Special EU Programmes Body, said: **“I'm delighted to hear about the progress of this pioneering EU INTERREG cross-border project, which has seen a tremendous amount of development in such a short space of time. These achievements ensure the safeguarding of our shared marine environment and continue the necessary conservation work to protect priority species and habitats just like Ariel and Merida. The significant progress so far , can be attributed to the strong cross-border partnership, combined with innovative marine technology. The expertise and determination of Sea Monitor's project partners is helping push the boundaries of marine research in the seas not only around Northern Ireland, but in Ireland and Western Scotland.”**

The work is part of SeaMonitor, a unique marine research project, the first of its kind in Europe, studying the seas around Ireland, Western Scotland and Northern Ireland. The project is led by the Loughs Agency and supported by another eight leading marine research institutions using innovative marine species tracking technology to better understand and protect vulnerable marine life in our oceans.

The SeaMonitor project will deliver Europe's largest telemetric marine array and spatial models supporting the conservation of basking shark, cetaceans, salmon, seals and skate. It will also provide three Management Plans; one for skate in the area from Loch Sunart to the Sound of Jura and two for salmon in both the River Foyle and Clyde estuaries.

Funding for the SeaMonitor project has been provided by the EU's INTERREG VA Programme (Environment Theme), which is managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), to the tune of €4.6m. Match-funding for this project has been provided by the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government in Ireland. This substantial investment will also extend the existing network of 'smart' buoys and oceanographic models – delivered by sister projects COMPASS and MarPAMM – so that a line of acoustic receivers runs between the island of Ireland and Scotland.

For more information about the project check out www.loughsagency.org/seamonitor or follow the project on Twitter (@SeaMonitor1)

All media enquiries to Loughs Agency +44 (0) 28 7134 2100.

About the SeaMonitor Partnership

1. Loughs Agency (Lead Partner)

An agency of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission (FCILC), established as one of the cross-border bodies under the 1998 Good Friday Agreement between the UK and Ireland. The Agency aims to provide sustainable social, economic and environmental benefits through the effective conservation, management, promotion and development of the fisheries and marine resources of the Foyle and Carlingford Areas. In its role as lead partner the Agency will co-ordinate the delivery of the five species models and the three management plans. The Agency will also lead in the salmon fieldwork and research for the River and Lough Foyle area. www.loughs-agency.org

2. Marine Institute

The Marine Institute is the Irish national agency for marine research, technology, development and innovation, promoting sustainable development of marine resources. The Institute's main role in SeaMonitor is to provide technical support for the deployment and maintenance of acoustic receivers and other monitoring equipment, data acquisition and

data analyses. The Marine Institute will contribute towards the objective of strengthening current information and filling in crucial information gaps on specific areas and habitats of interest across jurisdictions and identify the relative importance of these habitats at the different stages of migration of highly mobile marine species. www.marine.ie

3. Queens University Belfast

Queen's University Belfast is one of the leading universities in the UK and Ireland and is and a member of the Russell Group of UK research intensive universities. The main role of Queen's University Belfast in SeaMonitor will be to lead in the fieldwork and research of basking shark and skate in the seas off Ireland, Western Scotland and Northern Ireland.

www.qub.ac.uk

4. Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)

AFBI carries out high technology R&D, statutory, analytical & diagnostic testing and consultancy work for government and commercial companies globally. Fisheries and Aquatic Ecosystems Branch provides research, monitoring and technology transfer in support of evidence-based sustainable management of freshwater fisheries and marine resources in Northern Ireland. AFBI is a Non-Departmental Public Body sponsored by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. AFBI's main role in SeaMonitor will be to lead on the salmon fieldwork and research in the River Bush area of Northern Ireland.

www.afbni.gov.uk

5. University of Glasgow

Founded in 1451, the University of Glasgow is the fourth oldest university in the English-speaking world and is a member of the prestigious Russell Group of leading UK research universities. As the SeaMonitor's only Scottish partner, the University's role in SeaMonitor is to provide a lead role in the salmon research elements in the River Clyde area of Western Scotland. www.gla.ac.uk

6. University College Cork

University College Cork is a constituent university of the National University of Ireland and is located in the city of Cork. UCC's main role in SeaMonitor is to provide a lead role in the seal fieldwork and research elements. www.ucc.ie

7. Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology

Founded in 1972 as the Regional Technical College in Galway, the Institute has expanded to five locations in the west of Ireland. The Marine and Freshwater Research Centre (MFRC) at the Institute is a dynamic group working to enhance the management of marine and freshwater ecosystems worldwide. As part of the SeaMonitor project the Institute will carry out acoustic monitoring for cetaceans www.gmit.ie

8. Ocean Tracking Network – Dalhousie University

OTN's mission is to inform the sustainable management and stewardship of aquatic animals by providing knowledge on their movements, habitats and survival in the face of changing global environments. As part of the SeaMonitor Project the OTN are providing invaluable technical advice, equipment and support in setting up and testing the array.

www.oceantrackingnetwork.org

9. University of California Davis

UC Davis is a public institution, land-grant university and pioneer in interdisciplinary problem-solving. Its four colleges, five professional schools, more than 100 academic majors and 86 graduate programs make it the most comprehensive of all the University of California campuses. UC Davis is providing invaluable technical advice, equipment and research assistance in setting up and testing the array. www.ucdavis.edu

Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB)

The SEUPB is a North/South Implementation Body sponsored by the Department of Finance in Northern Ireland and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in Ireland. It is responsible for manage two EU Structural Funds Programmes, PEACE IV and INTERREG VA which are designed to enhance cross-border co-operation, promote reconciliation and create a more peaceful and prosperous society.

The Programmes operate within a clearly defined area including Northern Ireland, the Border Region of Ireland and in the case of INTERREG VA, Western Scotland.

The INTERREG VA Programme has a value of €283 million and aims to address he economic and social problems which result from the existence of borders. For more information on the SEUPB, please visit www.seupb.eu

PHOTO