



Dr Samantha Cox



SeaMonitor

In the first of our “getting to know you” series, we shine the spotlight on Dr Samantha “Sam” Cox. Sam is a post-doctoral researcher for the SeaMonitor project and is based at the University College Cork. She investigates the dive behaviour, distribution, post-release survival, habitat-use and interactions with fisheries of rehabilitated harbour seals, fitted with remote tracking devices that record and send data on location and dive parameters.

Sam graduated from her PhD in 2016 at Plymouth University, which focused on investigating links between physical oceanographic processes and the distributions and foraging behaviours of marine mammals and seabirds across shelf-seas. Following this, she completed a 1.5-year post-doctoral position at CNRS in Chize (France), where she worked on juvenile southern elephant seals and aspects of their foraging behaviour and 1st-year survival. She then completed a 2-year fellowship at the IRD in Sete (France), focused on investigating the foraging behaviours of booby seabirds across tropical island ecosystems of the Atlantic Ocean.

Generally, her research interests are focused on understanding the behaviours and distributions of marine vertebrate predators, to assess how these animals may be impacted by anthropogenic activities and environmental change (e.g. climate change, commercial fisheries), with an aim to improve conservation management.

When did you know you wanted to become a scientist? Were you interested in marine biology from a young age?

As far back as I can remember, I was always interested in animals and nature - and was lucky to have grown up in the countryside where there is plenty of wildlife to observe. I think my interest in the marine environment stemmed from annual family camping holidays on the west coast of Scotland. In school I enjoyed and did well in physics, math and biology - which I think introduced the idea of studying science at university.

How did you get involved in studying seals specifically?

During my PhD, my work focused on understanding the distributions and movements of cetaceans and seabirds relative to their physical environment. A lot of the concepts and skills are transferable across far-ranging marine predators such as seals. I had a great opportunity to work on seals following my PhD which I really enjoyed. Following this, I completed a 2-year research position studying seabirds in tropical environments, after which I returned to seals on the SeaMonitor project. I think seals are a really interesting species that we still have a lot to learn about, and I thoroughly enjoy this work.



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If you could study any other species what would it be?

Seabirds and cetaceans (although I'm lucky to have studied these guys quite a bit during my PhD and previous post-doctoral positions). Otherwise, sharks, tuna and mackerel in the marine environment. On land - wolves or foxes.

What have been some of the highlights working on the SeaMonitor project?

The fieldwork I have been doing with Exploris Seal Sanctuary, attaching tags to rehabilitated seals has been interesting and it's great getting movement data from the tracked seals in real-time via the mobile phone network. I also really enjoy the international multi-project aspect of SeaMonitor, and hearing about all the interesting work being done by other team members on salmonids, basking sharks, rays and cetaceans, across the UK and Ireland. The people I have been lucky enough to interact and work with during SeaMonitor are another highlight.

What advice would you give to young people today who are considering a career in marine biology?

There are a range of jobs across the sector you can do, so research these and figure out what interests you most. But also be open to new experiences and to learning a range of skills - a lot of them are transferable. Also try to develop a good knowledge base not just in ecology and zoology, but also oceanography. Depending on your focus, investing time learning to code (e.g. R, Python etc), and getting a good grounding in math (and physics) and statistics will also be invaluable.

What question about the marine environment would you most like an answer to?

It's hard to pick because there is so much we don't know that we really need to know! In the context of my work at SeaMonitor, I would really like to know more about inshore fisheries - where they go, what they are doing, and how seals interact with them.