

Shannon Dolphin and Wildlife Foundation

Annual Report 2009

The SDWF consolidated its activities during 2009. Turnover remained remarkably consistent with 2008 at €42,000 and expenditure of €48,000. Research activity was maintained through our relationship with the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT).

Research

The SDWF relationship with GMIT continues to grow with two full-time research scientists based at the SDWF offices working on the PReCAST project with GMIT. An MSc student from GMIT spent her second summer in Kilrush working on acoustic monitoring and was joined for two weeks by a BSc student from Trinity College, Dublin. Three years of deployment of the dolphin field hut was completed at Moneypoint after which the hut was removed. A significant research project on basking sharks was initiated by the SDWF with most fieldwork carried out in Donegal and Kerry. A third trial using playbacks was carried out for BIM as part of their attempt to develop acoustic deterrents to deter common dolphins from trawl nets. Four scientific papers were published: two on photo-identification, one on winter transects and a review article.

Education

The education and awareness display was enhanced in the Shannon Dolphin and Wildlife Centre in Kilrush through provision of a flat screen TV and 10 minute presentation on the dolphins and the work of the SDWF. A cover was also constructed over a portion of the yard to enable visitors to access the skull collection. This was very well received by visitors, whose numbers exceed 1500. The SDWF Visitor Centre at Kilrush Creek Marina was opened every day from mid-May to September with two people employed to meet and greet visitors and explain the exhibits. We carried out six school visits. Two training courses on cetacean identification and live-stranding were delivered at the centre. SDWF also continued to contribute to Clare County Councils Blue Flag Awareness Programme and made an unsuccessful submission to the EDEN competition. Bord Iscaigh Mhara used the centre to deliver a sea survival training course for local boat operators.

SDWF contributed to the biggest wildlife production ever commissioned by RTE. Wild Journeys documented the migration of insects, birds, fish and mammals into Ireland. It took two years to make and was watched by around 300,000 people in March-April 2010.

Conservation

A mass stranding of 17 bottlenose dolphins in Fenit, Co Kerry caused considerable concern. The event was investigated including post-mortem examinations but were not thought to involve Shannon dolphins. SDWF have documented a potential range expansion of the Shannon dolphins west of Tralee Bay and off Loop Head which has considerable implications to their management. SDWF were involved in providing

advice and ensuring a Marine Mammal Observer was used in the Shannon Estuary on the Marine Institute multi-beam survey which was carried out as part of the Seabed Survey.

Monitoring

The SDWF were contracted to carry out tour boat monitoring on behalf of the NPWS. This is the ten year of monitoring and it proved to be of significance as SDWF suspect a change is occurring in the distribution of dolphins in the estuary. During 2009 there were major changes in monitoring indices derived from tour boat monitoring, especially mean trip length and time to locate dolphins. The proportion of trips with no dolphins observed was also greater than in previous years. This resulted in the total time on dolphins being down 32% overall and a huge 52% by the Kilrush dolphin-watching boat. This reflected a very poor season by dolphin-watching operators in the Lower River Shannon cSAC, who not only had to operate in a poor tourism season and poor weather, especially in August, but also struggled to find dolphins when conditions were good.

Merchandise

This was the second year of selling merchandise in the SDWF centre. This was in response to people wishing to purchase some of the educational resources. A range of merchandise was purchased and costs were kept low so visitors got value for money. A proposal from Kilrush Gateway Project for SDWF to provide tea and coffee to visitors going dolphin-watching was successful with 400 visitors taking up the offer. They also brought biscuits and merchandise. Profits contributed to the cost of public liability and contents insurance in the centre.

Overall, 2009 was another successful year for the SDWF. Improvements were made to the education and awareness resources in the centre opening hours. The research programme continues to expand and monitoring of the dolphins is ongoing. During 2010, a major research programme will end and SDWF need to look to the future to see how it can continue with its research and education programme.

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