

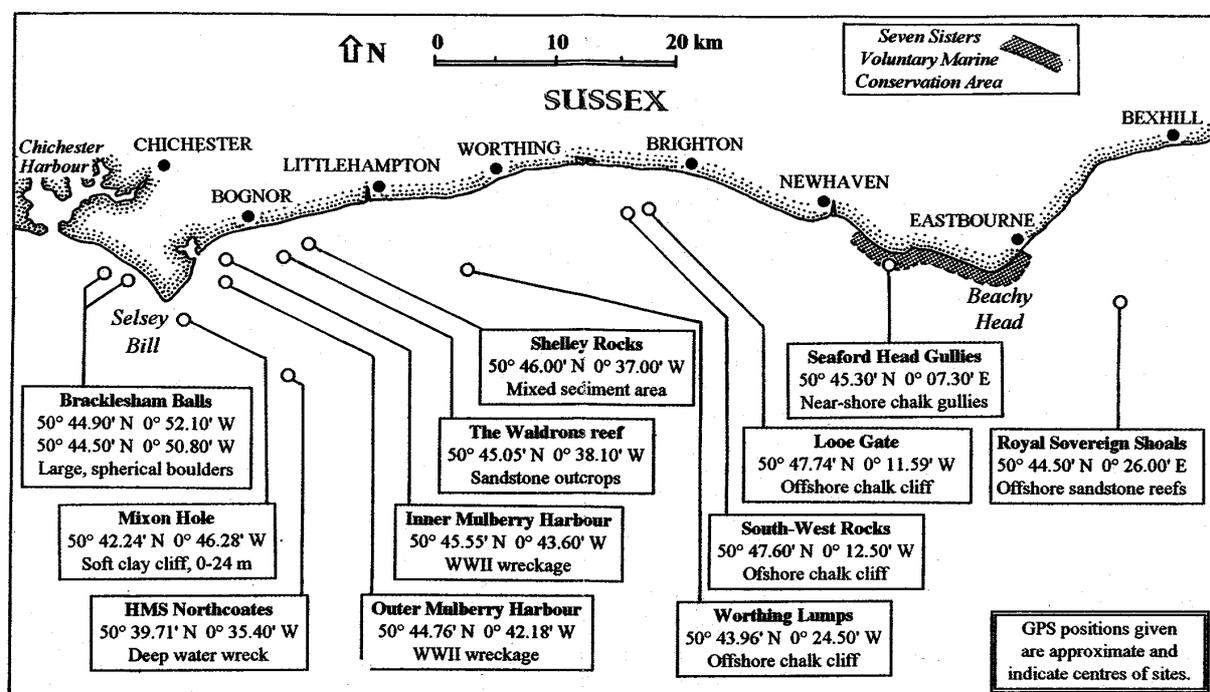
# SUSSEX MARINE SITES OF NATURE CONSERVATION IMPORTANCE

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past 30 years, the rising popularity of SCUBA diving has meant that more people have been discovering for themselves what lies in our coastal waters.

In particular, a project called '*Sussex SEASEARCH*', has recently provided much information on the near-shore sea bed off the Sussex coast, its marine life, geological features and wrecks. The project is organised in Sussex by a local steering group and is linked to a national *SEA SEARCH* scheme run by the Marine Conservation Society and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee,

One result of this survey is that certain sites have been found to be of special interest for their wildlife and/or their natural features. It is important that all seafarers are informed where these sites are and what their interest is, so that they can be encouraged to help in their protection.



## WHY ARE THESE SITES IMPORTANT?

The sites indicated above are regarded as being the best examples of their type off the Sussex coast. They display a range of features, including deep clay cliffs, sandstone reefs, shallow and deep water wrecks, chalk cliffs and mixed sediment grounds. Associated with each of these is a rich variety of animals and plants, specially adapted to the prevailing conditions. Several non-native marine species are also present: slipper limpets, for instance, which originate from the east coast of America, now dominate areas of mixed sediments around Selsey Bill.

Sussex is the only location in the British Isles where chalk appears in the form of offshore cliffs. These low, shore-facing cliffs occur in relatively shallow water between Littlehampton and Brighton. The wildlife associated with them is adapted to the soft nature of the rock, with many species boring into it, leading to the formation of scattered chalk cobbles and pebbles at the base of the cliffs.

There are no hard and fast boundaries to mSNCIs - the area covered by each site varies considerably. The positions for the centre of each site are given above. When in the vicinity of these sites, you are

asked to ensure that no harm is done to the sea bed through your activities. By respecting this request, you will be helping to ensure that these sites are safeguarded for future generations to enjoy.

### **WHAT ARE SITES OF NATURE CONSERVATION IMPORTANCE?**

On the land, Local Authorities and agencies have identified over 500 Sites of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCIs), to protect their habitats and their wildlife, and to encourage sensitive management. The *SEA SEARCH* project, and other survey work, has shown that equally valuable habitats occur below low water mark and that some are of importance in a regional or even a national context.

SNCIs are voluntary designations and their success, on land or below the sea, depends on the responsible actions and co-operation of all concerned. Statutory protection for certain parts of the sea, under the EC Habitats Directive, is not expected to come into effect until the turn of the century. In the meantime, by extending the SNCI network into the marine realm the intention is to raise awareness of these subtidal sites and ensure that the special interest is preserved in the future.

### **THE TRIALS OF MARINE LIFE**

The Sussex area lies on the eastern side of a transition in the English Channel between clearer waters to the west and murkier waters further towards Dover. Marine life here has to contend with an open exposure to wave action, strong currents around headlands and high levels of suspended silt from dissolution of chalk rock, rivers and sewage outfalls.

Human pressures are considerable here as the coast is so built up. Spoil has to be regularly dredged and deposited at sea in order to keep harbours and marinas open, whilst in other areas marine aggregates are extracted. Both of these licensed activities are potentially very damaging to marine SNCIs.

Sussex waters also support an important fishery, which in East Sussex is mostly for various whitefish species, and in West Sussex is mostly for lobster and crab. Some fishing practices, including scallop dredging and bottom trawling, have serious detrimental effects on sea bed communities. Recent legislation, however, allows fisheries ministers and Sea Fisheries Committees to take account of nature conservation in carrying out their fisheries duties.

It is hoped that these various legitimate activities in the future will not diminish the quality of the mSNCIs. Indeed, mutual benefits to all parties could be achieved by general recognition of the importance of these sites, especially their ability to act as refuges for all forms of marine life, including commercial fish. Responsibility for these sites will lie with all sea users.

### **SUSSEX SHIPWRECKS**

The Sussex coastline is thought to have more 'modern' wrecks lying off it than any other slice of Britain's coastline, with over 300 charted. Many of these date from the Second World War (especially in the Pagham area), though several date from much earlier times. Today they provide hard substrata standing proud of the surrounding seabed, often acting as oases attracting many forms of marine life, especially fish.

Of the many historical wrecks off the Sussex coast, there are four which have statutory protection: *HMS Hazardous* in Bracklesham Bay (1706); the 'Black Cat' site close to Brighton Marina (~1550); the *Amsterdam* near Hastings (1749); and the *Anne* near Winchelsea (1690). Divers may not dive within 100 m of these sites without a licence.

At all mSNCIs, divers and anglers are asked to observe the following **Code of Conduct**:

- When diving in a nature conservation area, such as an mSNCI or within the Seven Sisters Voluntary Marine Conservation Area, show respect for marine life and physical features which contribute to making the site special.
- Don't disturb or collect marine life unnecessarily anywhere. Remember that some animals are very delicate, or live in such a way that they will die if moved. Keep animals you collect wet and cool, and always return them carefully to the sea, unless you have a well-established aquarium in which to keep them.
- Make sure you don't alter the nature of the habitat where marine life lives. For example, if turning over cobbles or small boulders when under water to investigate what lies beneath them, return them to their original position when you have finished.

- If possible, try not to let exhaust bubbles become trapped in the ceilings of holds in wrecks or in small caves, forming air pockets. Attached marine life will die if exposed to air for any length of time.
- Careless finning close to delicate species can easily cause damage. It can also stir up silt, smothering animals and preventing other divers (especially photographers) from seeing what you've just seen.
- Within mSNCIs, anglers should return to the sea alive all unwanted fish, especially territorial ones, such as conger and species of wrasse (ballan, corkwing and goldsinny). The removal of large individuals of these long-lived species may have a profound effect on the local subtidal ecology.

#### **FURTHER INFORMATION**

If you would like to discover more about Sites of Nature Conservation Importance within Sussex, either terrestrial or marine, please contact the West Sussex County Council's Planning Department (Ecology Section) on 01243 756852; or the East Sussex County Council's Transport and Environment Department (Ecology Section) on 01273 481621.