

Northern Ireland has one of the most varied coastlines in Europe. From the cliffs of Bengore Head on the Causeway Coast, to the bird life of the Copeland Islands, to the turbulence of Strangford narrows, we have free access to a **fantastic marine environment.**

This environment is, however, highly dynamic so make sure you know what the tides are doing and have taken account of the weather and swell forecasts. Whatever your activity, learn the ropes from an experienced Accredited Instructor and join a club where you can participate with like-minded individuals.

Find out more about WiSe

www.wisescheme.org

Why not take part in a Leave No Trace Awareness Course
For more information visit www.leavenotraceireland.org

Get involved in the Green Blue Initiative

www.thegreenblue.org.uk

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Enjoy the Great Outdoors

A guide to responsible recreation on the sea





The sea is also home to a myriad of species from the largest to the smallest. They rely on clean, oxygen-rich water and need to be free from disturbance to feed, breed and survive. Whether you cruise in a yacht, race in a dinghy, rip up the surf, fish for your supper or paddle your kayak, we need to ensure that our activities have as minimal an impact on the environment and its associated wildlife as possible.

Almost all marine wildlife is protected by law from disturbance, whether through reckless or even unintentional actions, so it is important to give these wonderful animals plenty of space; especially if operating close to shore or in watercraft that are quiet and cannot be easily seen or heard approaching.

Following the relevant principles of Leave No Trace is a good way to develop a sustainable approach to what we do:

- Plan Ahead and Prepare;
- Be Considerate of Others;
- Respect Wildlife;
- Leave What You Find; and
- Dispose of Waste Properly.

If you are a Leader or Instructor you should also consider attending a WiSe course (Wildlife Safe) to improve your knowledge and awareness.

Another great initiative is the joint development between the Royal Yacht Association and the British Marine Federation called the “The Green Blue” Programme. This programme raises awareness and runs practical projects based on easy best practice advice to anyone keen to make boating in the UK as sustainable as possible.

This brief guide will help you to be aware of the potential impacts that you could have and then how to best to mitigate against them.

Birds

There are two main categories of birds that use the coast:

1. Shore birds that spend a lot of their feeding time on mudflats and sandy beaches; and
2. Sea birds that often nest on sea cliffs and tend to feed at sea. Birds expend huge amounts of energy to fly and need to get plenty of food and rest. Try not to cause them to take flight by keeping your distance. Young sea birds are very prone to disturbance and guillemots can be positively suicidal when they feel threatened.

Seals

There are two species of seals in our waters:

1. The common or harbour seal; and
2. The grey seal.

They need time to rest out of the water, so avoid causing them to come off their haul-outs by giving them plenty of space. Seals are naturally inquisitive; if they are in the water try to stay quiet and keep still and they may well come to you. Don't harass them by chasing after them. In the spring time common seals give birth to small brown or grey coloured pups which have a constant bond with the mother and swim from birth. Never cause a mother and pup to be separated. In late autumn grey seals give birth to snowy white pups on remote islands and beaches. Do not go near them or touch them, their mother may be away feeding and they can drown if scared into the water.

Whales and Dolphins

Seeing porpoises, dolphins or even whales is one of the most exhilarating experiences for the recreational user of the sea. These wonderful sea mammals, known as ‘cetaceans,’ may come to have a look at you or ride a bow wave. Again if they choose to – that is fine – but do not chase after them and never come between a mother and calf. Porpoises are very plentiful all around our coasts but are very shy creatures.

Big Fish (basking sharks and sun fish)

The second largest fish in the world frequents our waters and is regularly seen on the north coast. Give this big fish plenty of space; it may come to look at you but don't paddle, sail or motor to it. Sun fish look like something out of science fiction but are also increasingly seen in our waters.

The general rule for wildlife is to stay at least 200m away and travel slowly parallel to the direction it is swimming. If an animal chooses to visit you then you will have a magical and memorable experience.

Fishing

Our fish stocks are not what they used to be and much of our wildlife relies on the fish for food. Sustainable angling practices mean that you should only keep what you can realistically eat fresh. After that it would be best to adopt a ‘catch and release policy’. Please note that under the Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern-Ireland) 2011 Common Skate and Angel Shark are now protected species and it is illegal to fish for them in Northern Ireland coastal waters.

