

NEWS

Inishowen is 'hotspot' for huge basking sharks

Buncrana-based American researcher aims to increase local awareness of their presence

INISHOWEN IS an international 'hotspot' for basking sharks - the second largest fish species on the planet.

CRONAN SCANLON

Not a lot of people know that, but a young American researcher is hoping her work here will change that and lead to the establishment of a Marine Protected Area (MPA) off the peninsula, between Malin Head and Dunaff Head.

Originally from Cincinnati, Ohio, Alex McInturf has made Buncrana her home for the last three summers, and she just loves it.

"It's a really amazing small town with an equally amazing culture and sense of community," she told the Inishowen Independent this week.

"The people here are generally curious about you, they just don't care about your (career) status and that's cool."

Ms McInturf, however, was surprised to learn that so many local people did not realise they were on the edge of a basking shark hotspot.

In recent years, Inishowen has moved on to the world map thanks to both Star Wars and the Irish Open. The ambitious marine biologists now wants to make it famous for these little known about creatures, which can grow up to eight metres (26 ft) in length.

A graduate of Williams College (MA) with dual degrees (BA) in biology and

English, she is now a PhD candidate in Animal Behaviour at the University of California, Davis, where she began her work with the internationally renowned Dr Pete Klimley. He is a biotelemetry consultant and shark expert who helped establish the link between the Irish Basking Shark Project, Queen's University Belfast and UC Davis.

It was Dr Klimley who also introduced her to Inishowen, and the project, after he had visited Inch Island as part of his lecture tour.

"He had heard that Malin Head was a basking shark hotspot and I was under his radar because of my experience in tagging other shark species in South Africa and the Bahamas.

"He asked me would I be interested in going to work in Donegal and, of course, I said 'yes' and that's why I'm here," she explained.

Thanks to Dr Breda Friel and Paul Fitzsimmons, whom she lodges with, she has "fully integrated" into the Buncrana community.

The Irish Basking Shark Project (IBSP) started in Donegal in the early 2000s when it was estimated that up to 1,000 of them could have been passing Inishowen at any given time.

"Numbers seem to have decreased somewhat since then, but basking sharks are highly migratory and travel all over the world. Some sharks that we tagged in Inishowen could be found as far away as



■ A basking shark breaches off the Irish coast. Pic by Youen Jacob

New England, on the east coast of America. They are driven to these hotspots, one of which is off Inishowen."

Ms McInturf works closely with a number of national and international bodies, such as the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group (IWDG), the voluntary Inishowen Basking Shark Study Group and the EU INTERREG funded Sea Monitor Project as well as Mr Emmett Johnston. One of the founding members of the IBSP, Mr Johnston has recently taken up a position as the Divisional Ecologist with the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS).

"Emmett has been doing huge work in this area since the early 2000s, my work is just following on from that," she explained.

"My interest is in basking shark behaviour. We use tags that help track the sharks by satellite, but there have been very few studies out there tracking what basking sharks have been doing minute-by-minute in these hotspots."

She is interested both in their eating habits and their social behaviour.

"They are very picky eaters. Plankton is becoming less plentiful and plankton

populations are moving further north. However, if there are changes in this (Inishowen) area, they may stop coming up here. I'm also interested in their social behaviour, for example, how they interact with each other. That (interaction) requires a lot of brainpower. They must have something in common with each other - it's not an area that has been really looked at. In these hotspots, they swim side by side and follow each other and the question is 'why?'"

When Donegal was crowned 'Coolest Place on the Planet' by National Geographic Traveller in 2017, the smart-thinking people at the Irish Basking Shark Project applied to the National Geographic's lucrative trust for funding, and succeeded.

"National Geographic said Donegal was the coolest place on the planet, so we told them this could drive eco tourism in the area. They are now sponsoring the social aspect of this study as basking sharks in Ireland are a very hot topic," she adds.

She warned, however, that legislation to protect basking sharks in Ireland is 'lacking' and she hopes the project can

increase awareness of their plight.

As part of the project, Ms McInturf also wants to increase local awareness and will give what will no doubt be a fascinating talk in The Exchange in Buncrana on Tuesday, August 20th.

She will talk about her work, the importance of basking sharks to Inishowen and will also show spectacular film footage of the giant sharks hunting and at play off the peninsula.

Ms McInturf also appealed to Donegal folk to play their part by reporting sightings of basking sharks to them.

"They are easy enough to identify as they are huge - up to eight metres in length. They are dark grey in colour and have two dorsal fins that can be seen sticking out of the water."

Anyone who spots one can alter the team through the Irish Basking Shark Project Facebook page, via www.baskingshark.ie or by email to baskingsharkproject@gmail.com.

Businesses and individuals who are interesting in sponsoring the project can also contact the team at the above addresses.



■ Ms McInturf promoting her talk this week on the National Geographic Reddit forum



■ Ms McInturf at work off Inishowen with Dr Pete Klimley, a biotelemetry consultant and world-renowned shark expert