Summer placement with COAST on the Isle of Arran

I spent my summer assisting a University of York PhD student on a long-term seabed and fisheries survey in and around Lamlash Bay No Take Zone on the Isle of Arran, off the coast of western Scotland.

The No Take Zone is managed by the Community of Arran Seabed Trust (COAST): an NGO who proposed the NTZ and help to support a growing number of researchers interested in marine spatial protection and the recovery of the Firth of Clyde. Our project involved hiring one of their RIBs – the Cowal – and SCUBA diving across various locations in the NTZ in order to collect and measure scallops.

Before I went on this placement, I had minimal cold-water diving experience and no experience of RIB-driving or the associated skills of rope-handling and tidal and sea-state observations. My summer in Arran has improved all of these immeasurably and given me much more confidence in the practical abilities you need to display in successful ecological survey practice.

Arran is an absolutely magical place to spend a summer; waking up with the northern granite peaks on one side and the glistening waters of the Firth of Clyde on the other is a humbling and unforgettable experience.
On our days off survey diving, we took time out to visit the many terrestrial wonders of the island: Glenashdale Falls, the seal-covered beaches of Kildonan, the mountain loch of Coire Fhionn and even the 864m height of the tallest peak, Goatfell. Additionally, because of the strong links between COAST and the local diving community, we were also able to go on a number of fun dives, most notably to the tabletop island of Pladda; an explosion of colourful anemone gardens and hydroid beds that rivals tropical coral reefs for wonder.

Finally, the community aspect of the placement was incredibly rewarding; as well as other MSc students from York, I met research students from the University of Glasgow and various COAST staff members and volunteers; the weekly Drift Inn pub quiz being a particularly important entry on the social calendar! COAST also invited us to take part in public outreach events across the island, where we talked to the public about the NTZ and informed them about the marine life resident in the Clyde’s waters. My highlight of these events was the “Tale of the Whale”, where myself and around 15 schoolchildren paraded a huge, paper whale down Lamlash high street!

I feel hugely privileged to have taken part in the Lamlash Bay survey, hugely grateful to all the people I met and hugely excited about all the experience and skills the placement has given me.

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