Jennifer Stark MEM Summer Placement: Isle of Arran, Scotland

“Oh cool... Scotland” was the more often-than-not dry response I received from friends and family alike when I told them where I was going to be based for my MSc Summer Placement. Actually, I was pretty excited – what better place to gain experience than back in my home country on the small, beautiful and isolated Isle of Arran?

The day I arrived was stunning, a day so hot that the horizon was hazy. As the ferry neared Brodick, and as Goat Fell, Arran’s highest hill came into focus, I knew I had made the right choice. Despite the weather turning and living up to Scotland’s stereotype for the majority of the summer, my spirits were not dampened (pun intended) and working with the Community of Arran Seabed Trust (COAST) was truly rewarding.

COAST, founded in 1995 by Howard Wood and Don MacNeish, is a community run charity. In 2008, they succeeded in helping establish the UK’s first No Take Zone (NTZ) in Lamlash Bay, followed, in 2014, by the designation of the South Arran Marine Protected Area (MPA). In late 2015 it is hoped that legislation - excluding destructive fishing practices from the area – will be implemented and this formed the basis for my project.

I spent my weeks on Arran being, in his words, “a glamorous assistant” to COAST’s chairman, and recent recipient of the Goldman Environmental Award, Howard Wood. Duties included, but were not limited to: boat maintenance, dive gear maintenance, compressing air, boat driving and, of course, scuba diving. With the help of Howard, I conducted 100m$^2$ video transects along the seabed around the South Arran MPA in order to gather baseline
data of mobile species observed. The hope is that future researchers can repeat the work, and prove that strict management regulations placed upon areas of the MPA do successfully promote habitat recovery, whilst also allowing biodiversity to increase to levels not seen today. Diving was essential for my data collection; however we also managed several fun dives and extra research dives around the MPA and within the NTZ. These gave me a real insight into just how much marine life is benefiting from protection.

Perhaps the biggest advantage of working with COAST was all the extra activities to get involved with; from beach scrambles and puppet shows, to interviews with journalists and being boatwoman to a New York Times Reporter, there was always something to get involved with. On a rarity that was a day off, Arran provided many escapes. Possibly the best thing about the island is that you can equally as easily be in the middle of a forest or up on the hills as you can be on the shore by the sea. Coastal walks were usually rewarded with seal sightings and, if you were really lucky, otters too, whereas hikes in the highlands offered close encounters with red deer, red squirrels and, soaring way above you, golden eagles. Collectively these animals are known as “Scotland’s Big Five”, and I was lucky enough to catch glimpses of them all.

To some, Scotland may not seem all that exciting but for me it was the perfect choice. The people, the work and the countryside all contributed to it being an unforgettable experience. I gained many new skills and have a new found love for cold water diving. It really was the perfect way to end a great year at York.