

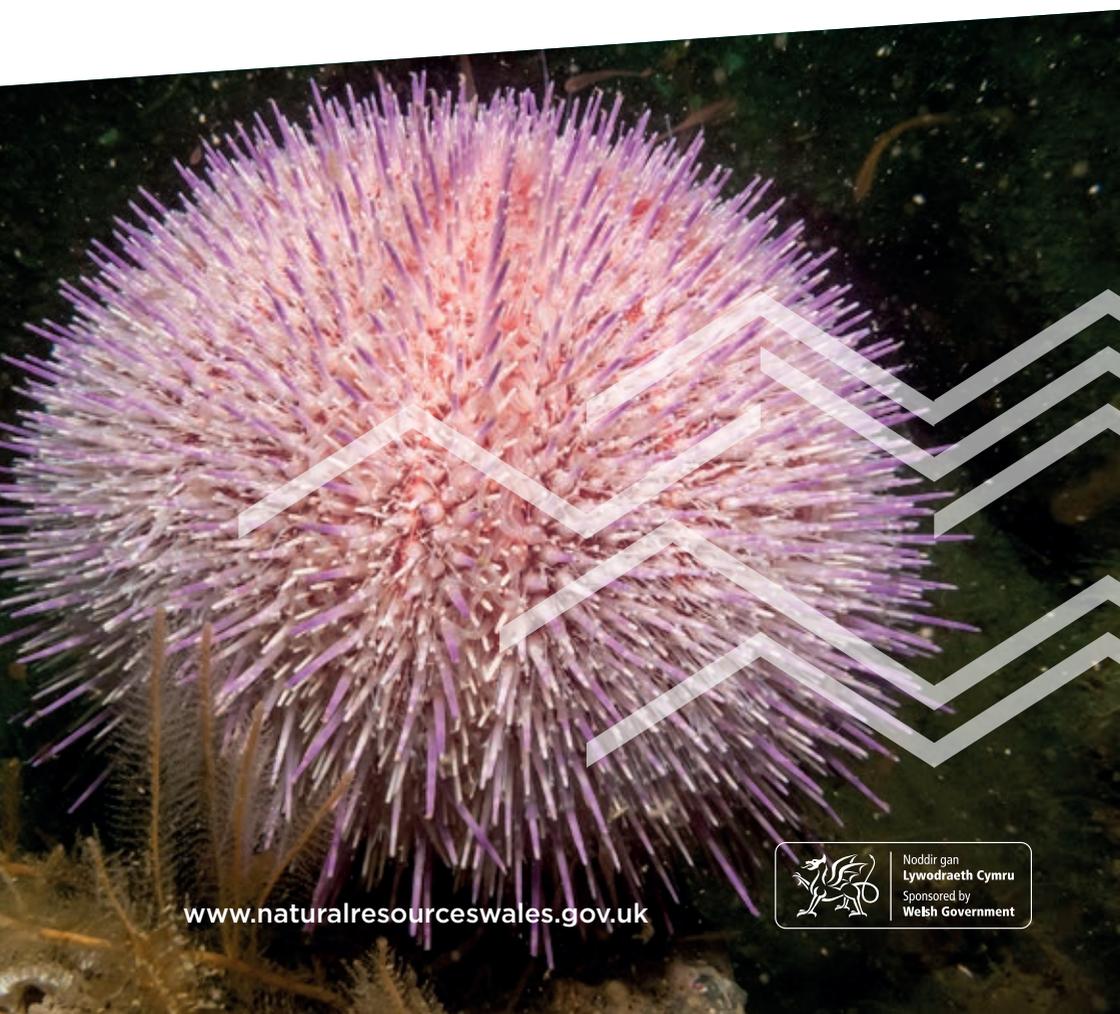


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# Skomer Marine Conservation Zone

//Marine life in an underwater refuge



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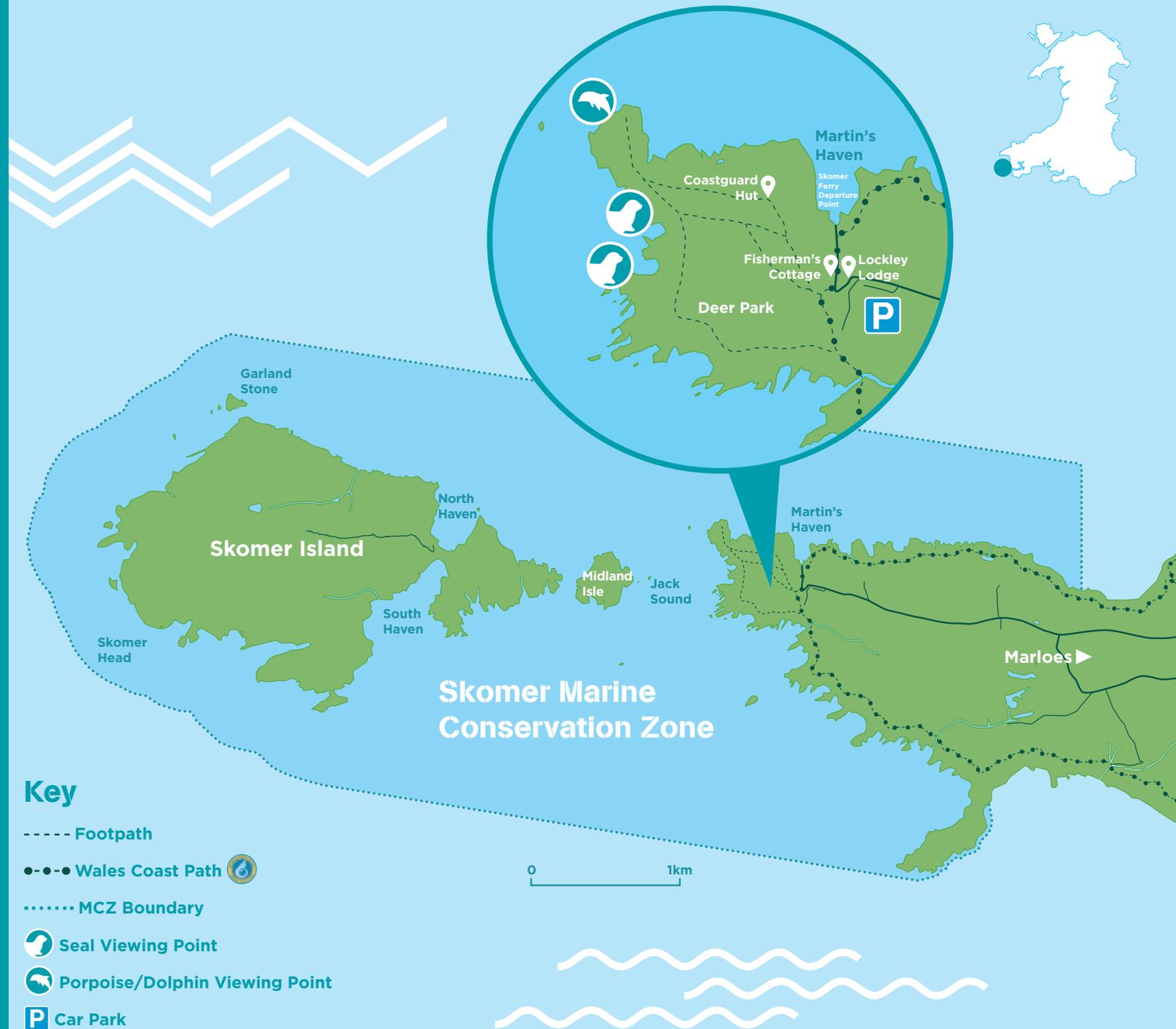


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# What is the Skomer Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ)?

The seas around Skomer Island (a National Nature Reserve itself) and the Marloes peninsula became a Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ) in 2014. Before this the area had been a Marine Nature Reserve for 24 years and an important study area for many years before that. Although the designation may have changed, the purpose of the Marine Conservation Zone is still to conserve this wealth of wildlife.

**By promoting careful and responsible use of the MCZ, habitats and wildlife are protected from damage and disturbance.**



All the images and information in the booklet are the products of the work NRW staff carry out in looking after the MCZ.

# Stars, squirts and slugs



## Skomer Marine Conservation Zone's amazing undersea wildlife

Imagine a hidden world where unfamiliar creatures like squirts, stars and slugs all exist side by side. Such a world exists in the Skomer Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ).

Squirts can't be compared to anything you will see on land - most look more like miniature hand-painted jellies and flower heads than animals. You may be more familiar with the stars - relatives of the common starfish. We have all sorts: sunstars, bloodstars, brittlestars, spinystars, cushionstars and featherstars! Even our tiny voracious slugs are infinitely more colourful and attractive than any you'll see in your garden.

The wonderfully scenic coast and seabed provide an abundance of different habitats - places for animals and plants to live - and they are teeming with all kinds of life, not just the familiar seals, fish, crabs and lobsters. It's home to more than a third of all British seaweed species, over 100 different sponges and 40 species of anemone and soft coral.

Each animal or plant fits into a complicated web of marine life and, through evolution, has adapted to living in one of the many different and demanding habitats to be found here. That adaptation has provided us with a multitude of wonderful organisms of many colours, shapes and sizes, hidden just out of sight beneath the waves.



## Habitats shaped by storms, tides and currents

Key to the huge variety of life in the MCZ is the diversity of its habitats. Water movement determines what lives where and sea conditions range from tranquil to tempestuous. Tides cause the sea to pour round the island and through the sounds in torrents.

Huge storm waves pound the south and west coasts. Powerful tidal currents sweep through the sounds and past headlands and offshore rocks.

Sands and muds form the seabed in deep, sheltered water and in bays.

Plants and animals live at different depths influenced by the amount of light reaching the seabed.

Complicated as it is, this complexity produces diverse habitats and wildlife.



//Wave Action



//Strong Currents



//Sheltered Bay

//If the water could be drained from Jack Sound, this would be the view from high above the sea outside Martin's Haven.

# Rocky shores – a place of extremes

The Skomer MCZ has 27 kilometres of coast. More than 95 percent is rocky shore. The coast is fringed by bays and promontories, cliffs and slopes, isolated rock pinnacles, caves and tunnels.

The shape of the shore and the animals and plants living there vary according to their exposure to wind, waves, tides and currents.

The difference in conditions between living at the top of the shore (wet at high tide/dry at low) and the bottom (always wet) is more extreme than a comparison between our Welsh mild marine climate and that of the North Pole! Plants and animals have adapted to survive this harsh environment.



**//Steep, extremely exposed cliffs** are dominated by small, tough animals - few seaweeds can survive.



**//Wave-swept rock slopes** provide a habitat for short, specialised forms of seaweed which hang on tightly to the rock surface.



**//Partially sheltered rock platforms** have rich communities with rock pools; seaweeds dominate the lower shore.



**//Boulders on sheltered shores** contain lush seaweed communities and provide shelter for many animals.



**Limpets and winkles affect the appearance of shores by grazing on young seaweed.**



**Brown seaweed - Fucus vesiculosus**  
**//Shore-dwelling seaweed are specialists at conserving water during low tide.**



**Barnacles - Balanus species**  
**//Shells protect these animals from drying out or being eaten.**



**//Splash zone lichens extend over sixty metres up cliffs.**



**Cornish clingfish - Lepidogaster lepidogaster**  
**//Vulnerable fish and soft bodied animals survive on shores by living in rock pools and sheltering under boulders.**

## The seaweed zone – underwater forests

Dense “forests” of large brown kelp plants grow only in the shallowest eight metres in the MCZ. They need plenty of light to grow. Water clarity affects how much light is available. Kelps can extend down to 30 metres in very clear water, but only to about one metre in the more murky water of nearby Milford Haven.



//Kelps are the largest marine seaweed. Their structure is simple. Their fronds form a forest “canopy”, often encrusted by seafirs and seamats.



//The holdfast anchors the plants to rock. Its root-like structure is an animal refuge. Over 250 species have been recorded living in kelp holdfasts.



//Kelp stipes, the “tree trunks”, are sometimes colonised by sponges and sea squirts.

Blue rayed limpets - *Patella pellucida*



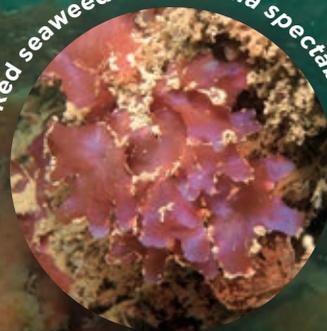
//Blue-rayed limpets are tiny, but voracious and eat large holes in kelp stipes.

Dahlia anemone - *Urticina felina*



//Flower-like anemones are actually predators equipped with stinging tentacles ready to capture food.

Red seaweed - *Drachiella spectabilis*



//Many red seaweeds need less light than kelp. They thrive in the shade of the kelp canopy and form dense “meadows” on rock slopes below the edge of the forest.

Ballan wrasse - *Labrus bergylla*



//Ballan wrasse patrol the kelp forest defending their territories.



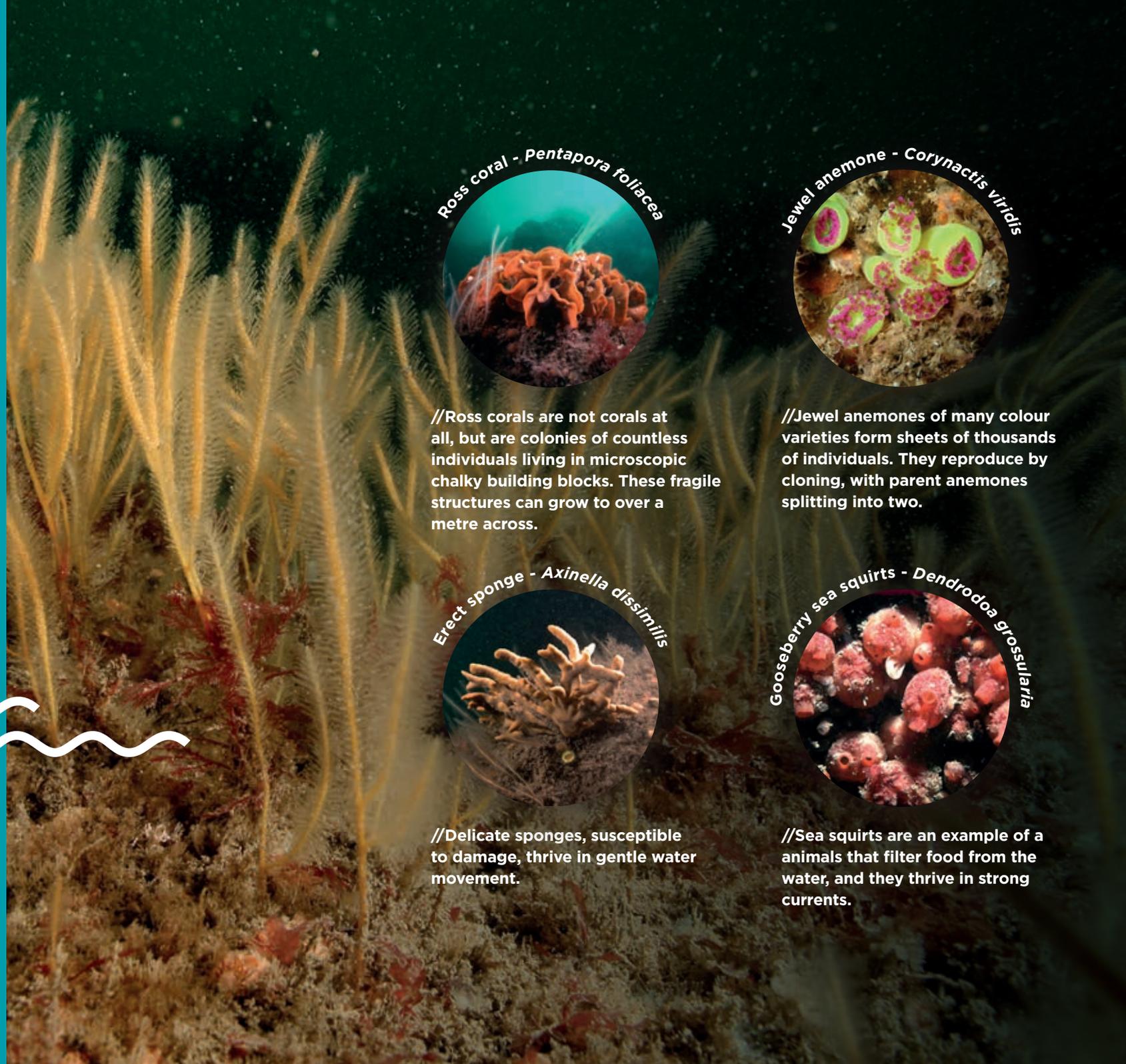
## The animal zone – colourful creatures create seabed ‘turfs’

Light-dependant seaweeds cannot survive in water much deeper than fifteen metres in the MCZ. Any rocky surfaces deeper than this are smothered by characteristic “turfs” of animals fixed to the seabed.

Tidal currents bring plentiful food, in the form of plankton and tiny organic fragments.

These minute particles are filtered from the water by specialised seafirs, seasquirts, sponges and bryozoans, and trapped by the stinging tentacles of anemones and corals.

In strong currents animals need to be firmly attached so as not to be swept away. In Jack Sound currents can reach over 10 miles per hour - about eight times faster than the average person can swim.



Ross coral - *Pentapora fofoacea*



//Ross corals are not corals at all, but are colonies of countless individuals living in microscopic chalky building blocks. These fragile structures can grow to over a metre across.

Jewel anemone - *Corynactis viridis*



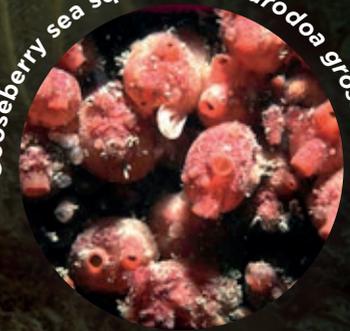
//Jewel anemones of many colour varieties form sheets of thousands of individuals. They reproduce by cloning, with parent anemones splitting into two.

Erect sponge - *Axinella dissimilis*



//Delicate sponges, susceptible to damage, thrive in gentle water movement.

Gooseberry sea squirts - *Dendrodoa grossularia*



//Sea squirts are an example of animals that filter food from the water, and they thrive in strong currents.

## Skomer seabed sediments – nowhere to run, everywhere to hide

At first glance sand, gravel and mud (sediment) habitats appear deserted. Don't be deceived – the animals that live here often use camouflage to stay alive on the sediment surface, or survive by burrowing beneath it.



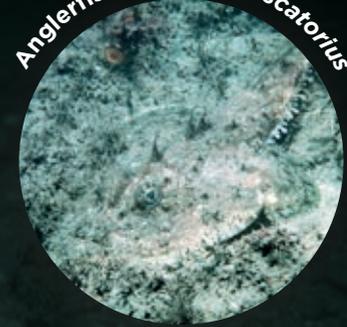
//**Seaweeds** do not like sediments, which are largely plant-free, except for one special habitat – the eelgrass bed. Eelgrass is the only underwater British flowering plant, and is very rare in Wales. The plants form very productive beds which stabilise moving sediments and provide shelter for fish.

Burrowing anemone - *Mesacmaea mitchellii*



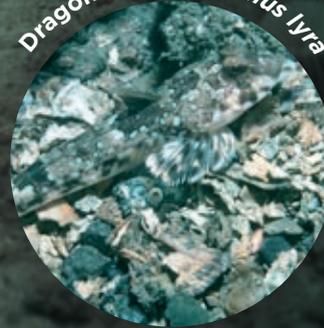
//Burrowing animals have a clever way of avoiding predators. Their tentacles capture food from the water passing by, whilst their bodies remain safely protected. When danger threatens they completely disappear into the sediment.

Anglerfish - *Lophius piscatorius*



//The anglerfish has perfected the art of camouflage. It eats a wide variety of prey which it lures into a suitable position above its cavernous mouth by twitching a lure on the end of its dorsal fin.

Dragonet - *Callionymus lyra*



//Camouflage is achieved by body shape, colour and pattern.

King scallop - *Pecten maximus*



//Scallops hide themselves under a thin layer of sediment and are protected by their thick shells from all but the most determined predators.



## Underwater predators and grazers hunt and forage

Not all marine animals are fixed to the seabed. Some range across wide areas of the MCZ, whereas others will keep to distinct territories.



//Free floating plankton are paralysed by the stinging tentacles of jellyfish, passed to the mouth, then digested in the central stomach.

Cuckoo wrasse - *Labrus mixtus*



//These colourful fish live in and defend territories. Cuckoo wrasse are 'protogynous hermaphrodites'. This simply means that they are all born females, but can become males when a dominant male disappears. This striking blue-marked one is male.

Common sea urchin - *Echinus esculentus*



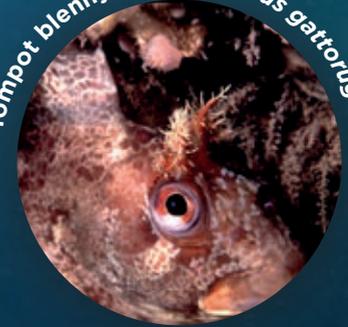
//Sea urchins are the "rabbits" of the marine world. They are the most important grazer of underwater rock surfaces and create bare patches for new plants and animals to grow on, so are vital to biodiversity.

Seven armed starfish - *Luidia ciliaris*



//Starfish meander across the seabed using hundreds of tube feet with sucker-like ends, each species seeking out its own favourite prey. This seven-armed starfish eats brittlestars.

Tompot blenny - *Parablennius gattorugine*



//Tompot blennies live in cracks and crevices in rock. They have large, fringed tentacles, one above each eye.



## Underwater predators and grazers hunt and forage



//Grey seals are Britain's largest predator. They roam widely hunting fish and shellfish. Each autumn they return to the MCZ's beaches and caves to have their pups and mate. Over 200 pups are born in the MCZ each year.

Spiny spider crab - *Maja squinado*



//Spiny spider crabs roam across the reef scavenging for food.

Common lobster - *Homarus gammarus*



//Lobsters and crabs hide in rock crevices and under boulders, coming out at night to feed.

Curled octopus - *Eledone cirrhosa*



//Octopus live in holes amongst rocks by day, but at night hunt for crabs, their favourite food. They are intelligent animals able to change colour and shape very quickly.

Violet sea slug - *Flabellina pedata*



//Sea slugs are picky eaters! Each species will have its own specific prey. Those that eat stinging animals are able to store stinging cells and use them to protect themselves. 75 species of sea slug have been recorded in the MCZ.

## Skomer rarities – trumpets, fans and fingers

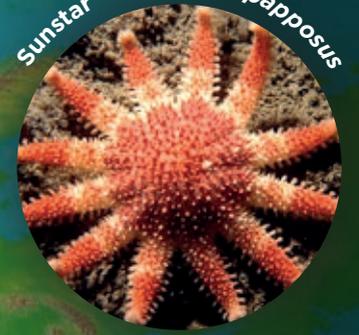
The MCZ is at the northern limit for many warm-water species found more commonly in the Mediterranean. Some northern species are also to be found as far south as Skomer.



Cold water

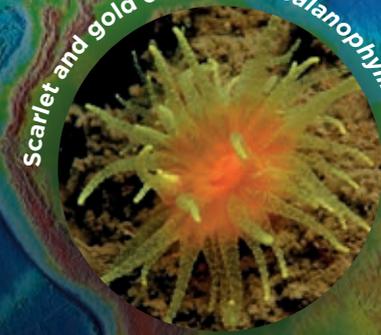
Warm water

Sunstar - *Crossaster papposus*



Northern species  
//The multi-armed sunstar *Crossaster papposus* is one example of a northern species near its southern limit.

Scarlet and gold cup coral - *Balanophyllia regia*



Southern species  
//These bright scarlet and gold star corals *Balanophyllia regia* thrive in strong wave surge areas.

Red sea fingers - *Alcyonium glomeratum*



Southern species  
//Tiny, white, anemone-like feeding polyps extend from these soft corals called red sea fingers *Alcyonium glomeratum*. When the polyps are retracted the colonies look like lifeless human fingers.

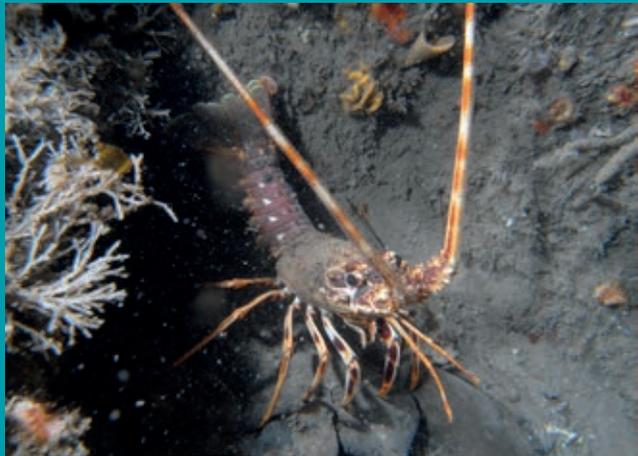
Yellow trumpet anemone - *Parazoanthus axinellae*



Southern species  
//Yellow trumpet anemone *Parazoanthus axinellae* colonies form patches more than a metre wide on vertical rock.

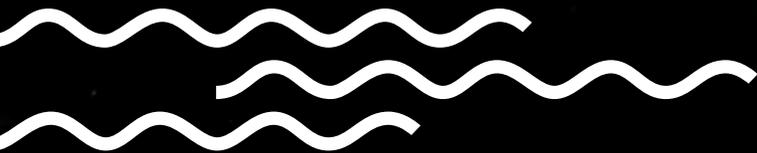
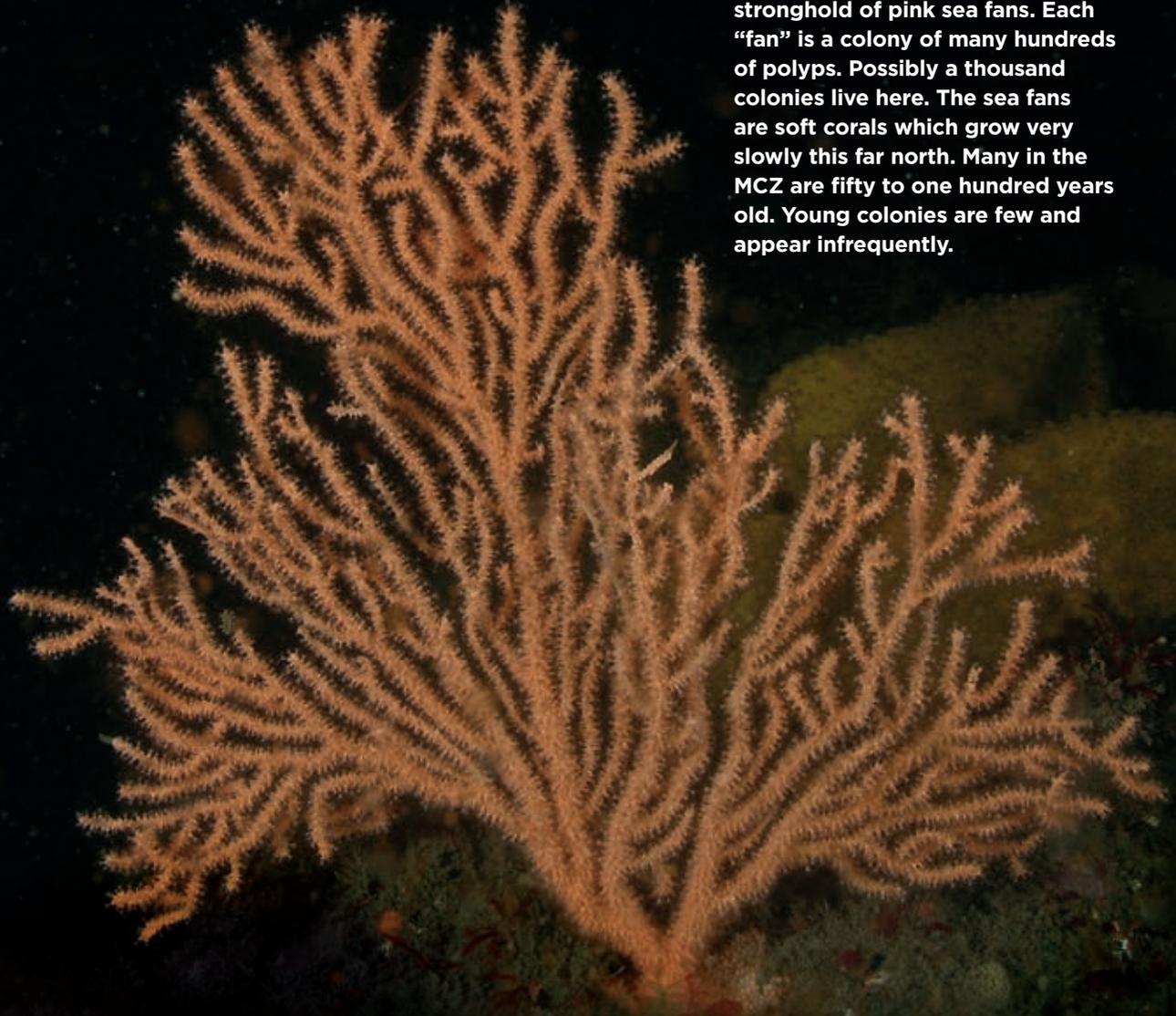
## Skomer rarities – trumpets, fans and fingers

Populations of scarce and long-lived species such as these are vulnerable and benefit from the protection of the MCZ. But the main aim is to safeguard the full range of marine wildlife here, not just the rare and unusual.



//The **crawfish** or spiny lobster *Palinurus elephas* lacks the large claws of the common lobster. It used to be common, but due to overfishing it is now a rare sight in UK seas.

//The MCZ is the northern-most stronghold of pink sea fans. Each “fan” is a colony of many hundreds of polyps. Possibly a thousand colonies live here. The sea fans are soft corals which grow very slowly this far north. Many in the MCZ are fifty to one hundred years old. Young colonies are few and appear infrequently.



# The role of the Skomer Marine Conservation Zone

The MCZ is part of a network of various types of Marine Protected Areas. Our purpose is to safeguard the full range of marine wildlife diversity. We operate an extensive research and monitoring programme that aims to broaden our knowledge and understanding of the marine species, communities and habitats found here.

By promoting careful and responsible use of the MCZ, habitats and wildlife are protected from damage and disturbance. You can help protect the MCZ by taking great care:

- Give priority to wildlife at all times;
- Minimise any damage or disturbance you cause, however unintentional;
- If you do disturb seabirds or seals, withdraw promptly and quietly;
- Keep noise to a minimum;
- Don't leave rubbish of any kind.

Skomer MCZ is managed by Natural Resources Wales, with advice from the SMNR Advisory Committee which has its membership drawn from a range of organisations.

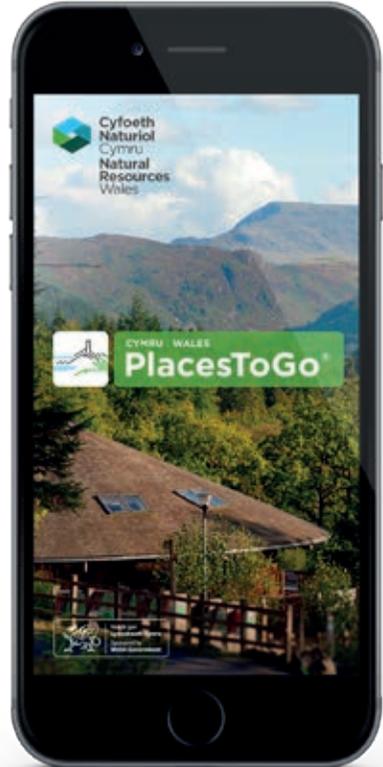
Leaflets about the codes of conduct and byelaws that apply to the MCZ and further information are available from:

## Skomer Marine Conservation Zone

Natural Resources Wales  
Fisherman's Cottage,  
Martin's Haven, Marloes,  
Haverfordwest,  
Pembrokeshire, SA62 3BJ.



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