THE MARINE AND FISHERIES CONSERVATION SECTION

QUARTERLY CATCH

OCTOBER TO DECEMBER 2025

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Here it is: the fourth and final **Quarterly Catch** for 2025, from **October to December!** Read below to check out what MFCS have been doing this quarter.

The Marine and Fisheries Conservation Section (MFCS) team, in line with the vision of the Marine Management Plan 2023-27, aim to conserve, protect and restore the rich biodiversity and unique natural ecosystems of St Helena's Marine Protected Area (MPA) with use of its natural resources managed in accordance with its International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Category 6 sustainable use principles now and for future generations.

It's been a busy past three months, MFCS have been very active in our scientific work and monitoring, with lots of progress and highlights:

We have continued with zooplankton surveys, the team has collected 83 samples over the past three months and 269 samples in total of fish eggs and larvae, providing a strong foundation for analysis. A whaleshark joined on one of our November surveying days, we caught a pyrosome (free floating filter feeder) and some juvenile fish, as well as the tail of an oarfish found on the surface. The winter round of Underwater Visual Census Surveys (UVCS) were completed in October, continuing to track fish, invertebrate, and plant communities.

Oceanographic monitoring using various data loggers, which were collected in December, provides continuous insight into water temperature and oxygen levels, supporting research and informing climate change resilience planning. The lobster tagging programme for the 2025/26 season is underway, focusing on brown spiny and endemic red slipper lobsters, and the grouper tagging programme continues to monitor abundance, growth, breeding, and movement patterns for the species. Additional species sightings, including the day sarpon, robust mora, and flying halfbeak, underscore the island's rich marine life.

The Marine Centre also hosted Year 9 students for a hands-on visit, which included a demonstration of otolith extraction, while Year 8 students received career talks at St Helena Secondary School, highlighting marine conservation pathways.

St Helena has established a fully trained, locally led Marine Compliance and Enforcement Section (MC&E), supported by the Blue Belt Programme, strengthening compliance and marine stewardship. Knowledge exchange with Ascension Island and other UK Overseas Territories has supported understanding of research on mesophotic ecosystems and advanced survey technologies. A workshop with Mission Atlantic has promoted collaboration across the Mid-Atlantic region, sharing insights on climate change, human impacts, and species conservation.

The publication of the second Marine Management Plan (MMP) Annual Report showcases progress in protecting St Helena's MPA, highlighting research, public engagement, and conservation milestones. St Helena's success in the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) tag return lottery, for the third time, demonstrates the effectiveness of the island's tagging programmes and sustainable fisheries management efforts.

IN THIS ISSUE

ZOOPLANKTON SURVEYS REACH MIDPOINT


PREPPING NET

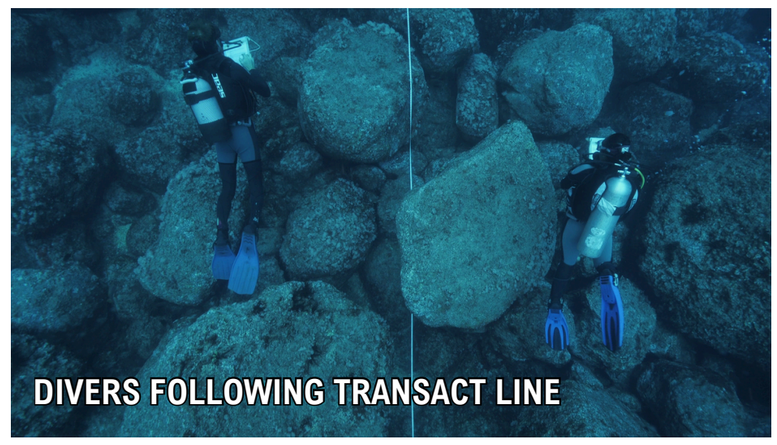
We have reached the midpoint of our zooplankton surveys, focusing on fish eggs and larvae, with fieldwork progressing well and remaining firmly on track. To date, an impressive 269 samples have been collected with 83 being collected over the past three months! This achievement provides an exceptional foundation for the next phase of analysis and reflects the team's consistent effort in the field.


FISH EGGS AND LAEVAE WITH JUVENILE FISH

During fieldwork, the team also discovered what appears to be an oarfish tail. The oarfish is an extremely long ribbon like fish, the longest bony fish in the world, known for its silvery scaleless body and red crest of dorsal fins. This rare and intriguing find contributes to our growing understanding of the lesser-known species that may be present in St Helena's surrounding waters. This unexpected discovery further highlights the island's unique marine biodiversity and reinforces the value of continued research in the area.

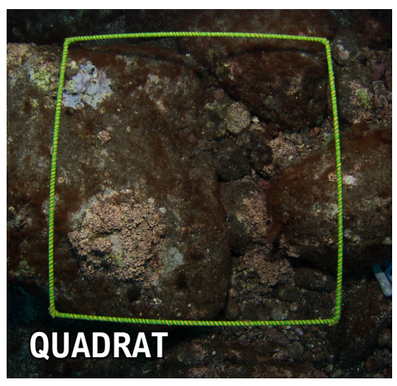
UNDERWATER VISUAL CENSUS: OCTOBER SURVEY COMPLETE

In October, the team successfully completed the winter round of UVCS for this year. These surveys observe and quantify fish, invertebrate, and plant communities, providing valuable insight into marine life abundance and trends across St Helena's waters.


DIVERS FOLLOWING TRANSACT LINE

This work builds on a long term UVC programme that was first established in 2002 and has been conducted regularly since 2013. The data gathered helps to inform conservation planning, support fisheries management, and provides a reliable baseline for identifying long term changes in St Helena's marine ecosystems.


TAKING QUADRAT PHOTOS


QUADRAT

To deliver this monitoring, surveys are carried out across 22 permanent paths located at 12 sites around the island, including Flagstaff Bay, Buttermilk Point, Banks, Rupert's Bay, James Bay, Bennetts Point, Billy May Revenge, Lemon Valley and Egg Island.

LONG TERM OCEANOGRAPHIC MONITORING

Since 2015, temperature data has been collected around St Helena as part of a long-term marine monitoring programme designed to track environmental change over time. This programme uses a range of environmental data loggers, including HOBO temperature loggers and MiniDOT oxygen loggers, which we service and replace every six months to ensure consistent and reliable data.


REPLACING miniDOT LOGGER


HOBO LOGGER (CLOSE UP)

HOBO temperature loggers are the most widely deployed and are often the easiest to see in the water. At sites such as the wreck of the Papanui in James Bay, they are attached to a length of rope marked by a yellow buoy, with the logger secured below, where it continuously records seawater temperature.

MiniDOT loggers are deployed at fewer locations but provide additional insight into water quality. These compact devices measure both water temperature and the amount of oxygen dissolved in the water, an important indicator of ocean health. The data is stored internally and later downloaded for analysis.


REPLACING HOBO LOGGER

Together, these monitoring tools provide a comprehensive picture of how St Helena's marine environment is changing over time. The information gathered supports scientific research and helps guide future marine management and climate change resilience planning for the island.

LOBSTER TAGGING PROGRAMME 2025/26


MEASURING STUMP CARAPCE

We have started our lobster tagging programme for the 2025/26 season, focusing on the two commercial species, the brown spiny lobster *Panulirus echinatus*, locally known as crayfish, and the endemic red slipper lobster *Scyllarides obtusus*, locally known as stump. This programme supports sustainable fisheries management by monitoring key aspects of the lobster population, including growth rates, abundance, breeding cycles, and movement patterns.

Tagging work started in November of this year, in line with the start of the lobsters' breeding season and will continue every other month until March 2026. Each work period includes three nights of diving and three days of potting. Night dives are carried out as lobsters are more active after dark, while daytime potting uses circular baited traps deployed in different locations around the island for a 24-hour period to safely capture lobsters without causing harm. Captured individuals are tagged with conventional identification tags, visible as small green markers.


DOUBLE TAGGED STUMP

GROUPER TAGGING PROGRAMME CONTINUES

MFCS has been carrying out our grouper tagging programme, which began in 2018. This long-term monitoring tracks fish abundance, growth rates, breeding cycles, and movement, providing vital information to support sustainable fisheries management.


GROUPER BEING MEASURED

Fieldwork is conducted one day each month. During surveys, fish are captured, measured, and tagged with conventional yellow tags before being released back into the ocean. Approximately 8% of the fish are double tagged, allowing researchers to account for tag loss. If a single tag is lost, data could be incomplete, but with two tags, the team can accurately estimate the proportion of tags lost and refine population assessments.

Some fish experience barotrauma, a condition caused by rapid changes in pressure during capture. This can result in internal injuries, such as the expansion of the swim bladder or displacement of organs. To reduce the effects of barotrauma, fish are carefully returned to depth using a specialized cage. This approach has shown excellent survival rates, with many individuals returning for subsequent recaptures. These repeated encounters provide valuable insights into fish movements, survival, and population dynamics, highlighting both the resilience of the species and the effectiveness of the methods used.

OCEANOGRAPHIC BUOY DISCOVERY AT EGG ISLAND


SVP BUOY (MISSING SENSORS)

At Egg Island, an unidentified buoy was recently discovered by Mr Gavin Maggott, who brought it to the Marine Centre. Part of the buoy had broken away, making it unclear what the device was or who had deployed it. Following further research by MFCS, the buoy was identified as an oceanographic monitoring tool known as an SVP, Surface Velocity Program, drifter. This sturdy buoy is designed to float with the currents near the surface, tracking water movement and recording key information such as sea temperature. Equipped with multiple sensors at different depths, it provides a detailed picture of conditions in the open ocean.

The buoy was designed by a company called Pacific Gyre, which develops innovative tools to help scientists and organizations study and better understand the world's oceans. Devices like this drifter are vital for monitoring currents, temperatures, and other ocean conditions, providing researchers with valuable insights into global marine environments.

YEAR 9 STUDENTS VISIT THE MARINE CENTRE

An exciting day was recently held at the Marine Centre, as we welcomed a group of Year 9 students eager to learn more about careers in marine conservation. The visit included a full tour of the centre, followed by a presentation featuring insights from our Marine and Fisheries Conservation Officer, Adam Riggs, and our Graduate Management Trainee, Shelby Bargo, who shared details of their roles and day to day work.


PRESENTATION


PRACTICAL DEMONSTRATION

The students also observed a practical demonstration of an otolith extraction from a tuna head. Otoliths are small structures in a fish's inner ear, which help fish maintain balance and sense movement in the water. For scientists, otoliths act like natural records of a fish's life. By examining the rings on an otolith, like counting tree rings, researchers can determine a fish's age, growth rate, and the environments it has lived in.

It was inspiring to see this group of young people showing curiosity and enthusiasm for marine science and conservation. We look forward to seeing these bright minds potentially contributing to the field in the future.

YEAR 8 CAREER TALK AT ST HELENA SECONDARY SCHOOL

SHELBY BARGO GIVING HER PRESENATION

During this quarter, our Graduate Management Trainee, Shelby Bargo, also visited St Helena Secondary School to deliver a career talk to Year 8 students who are beginning to consider their future options. During the session, Shelby provided an overview of her role within MFCS, introduced the wider team, and explained the variety of work each member undertakes.

She also shared practical advice on relevant subjects to study and highlighted ways students can get involved in marine conservation at an early stage, including volunteering opportunities and alternative pathways beyond traditional degree routes. The students were engaged and able to identify different fish species. They also discussed the scientific monitoring methods used by MFCS. It was encouraging to see their interest in marine science and conservation.

STRENGTHENING ST HELENA'S MARINE PROTECTION

In just five years, St Helena has progressed from having no dedicated marine enforcement capacity to establishing a fully trained, locally led Marine Enforcement Section, with support from the Blue Belt Programme. This represents a significant milestone in safeguarding the island's waters, strengthening compliance, and supporting long-term marine stewardship.

This achievement reflects the commitment and collaboration of all those involved and marks an important step forward in protecting St Helena's marine environment for future generations.

2019-2020

THE BLUE BELT PROGRAMME KICKSTARTS ST HELENA'S MARINE ENFORCEMENT JOURNEY

The Blue Belt Programme funds a Technical Cooperation Marine Enforcement Officer.

Jason Sparks arrives to establish the section, setting up regulations, compliance processes, fisher engagement, and training.

2021

ST HELENA GOVERNMENT FUNDS A LOCAL MARINE COMPLIANCE OFFICER

To work alongside Jason, building skills and training with the long-term goal of stepping into the Marine Enforcement Officer role and leading the Marine Enforcement Section, Kelly Jonas joins the team.

2021-2022

THE BLUE BELT PROGRAMME FUNDS A SECOND LOCALLY APPOINTED MARINE COMPLIANCE & ENFORCEMENT OFFICER

Strengthening resilience and succession planning. Peter Young joins the team in June 2022.

2023

FEBURARY

Kelly steps into the Marine Enforcement Officer role, taking over leadership of the Marine Enforcement Section.

2024

MARINE COMPLIANCE & ENFORCEMENT OFFICER ROLE FORMALLY INTGEGRATED INTO ST HELENA GOVERNMENTS CORE FUNDING!

In June 2024, Peter's position was formally integrated into SHG budgets as a core-funded post, reflecting a key milestone in the Marine Enforcement Sections continued development.

2025

BUILT FROM THE GROUND UP IN JUST FIVE YEARS

St Helena now has a fully trained, locally led Marine Enforcement Section with two core-funded officers.

KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE STRENGTHENS MARINE RESEARCH ACROSS UK OVERSEAS TERRITORIES

In November, our Marine and Fisheries Conservation Officer, Adam Riggs, travelled to Ascension Island to collaborate with the Ascension Marine team, alongside Dr Kerry Howell and Amelia Bridges from Plymouth Marine Laboratory and the University of Plymouth, and Dr Tim Noyes from the Bermuda Institute of Ocean Sciences.

Over the course of ten days, the group took part in a valuable knowledge exchange focused on the Darwin PLUS project, *Building baseline knowledge of mesophotic ecosystems in the Ascension Island Marine Protected Area*.

This innovative project uses a newly designed, low-cost, compact camera system to survey habitats and species at depths between 30 and 200M.

The visit facilitated productive discussions, allowing teams to share expertise, gain insight into ongoing work, and explore how this emerging technology could be applied to address key research questions across our respective territories.

MC&ES WELCOMES MARINE MANAGEMENT ORGANISATION (MMO) REPRESENTATIVES

MC&ES recently welcomed a representative, Sam Gregory, from MMO as part of a formal visit focused on officer development and a review of current procedures. During the visit, inspection procedures were formally reviewed and updated, alongside strategies relating to compliance and enforcement. These developments strengthen our ability to deliver effective marine protection and highlight the dedication and professionalism of both enforcement officers and support staff.


MC&E TEAM WITH SAM GREGORY

As part of this work, another representative, Paul Nelson, provided technical assistance to the Marine Enforcement team, supporting the installation and data analysis of Remote Electronic Monitoring (REM) systems. REM is a technology installed on fishing vessels that uses onboard cameras and sensors to remotely monitor fishing activity, including effort and catch, helping to improve compliance and strengthen fisheries oversight.

This visit reflects our ongoing commitment to transparency, accountability, and the continuous improvement of operational standards, as well as upholding the highest standards of marine stewardship and regulatory compliance, ensuring the long-term protection of St Helena's marine environment.

MISSION ATLANTIC WORKSHOP HIGHLIGHTS RESEARCH ACROSS THE MID-ATLANTIC REGION

A Mission Atlantic workshop was recently held, bringing together researchers to share outputs and findings from a range of studies focused on the marine environment of St Helena and the wider Mid-Atlantic region. The workshop covered research conducted across key areas, including seamounts along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, St Peter and St Paul's Rocks, St Helena, and Ascension Island.

Discussions focused on climate change scenarios, human impacts, environmental drivers, and the species that rely on these important marine habitats. By bringing together research from across the region, the workshop provided valuable insights into how these ecosystems are connected and how they may respond to future environmental change.

MMP 2ND ANNUAL REPORT MARKS ANOTHER YEAR OF PROGRESS FOR ST HELENA'S MPA

We are pleased to announce the publication of our second MMP Annual Report, marking another important milestone in our ongoing commitment to protecting and enhancing St Helena's MPA. The report highlights the strong progress made over the past year and reflects the continued dedication of all those involved in caring for the island's marine environment.

The 2024 to 2025 highlights showcase a year of growth, collaboration, and meaningful impact. A key moment was the release of the film *A Small Island with a Big Future: St Helena's Marine Protected Area* during MPA Day in August 2024, celebrating the island's rich marine heritage.

Research activity also remained strong, with scientific publications contributing to a better understanding of local marine life, including input from the Marine and Fisheries Conservation Section to the IUCN's global review of sharks, rays, and chimaeras.


VIEW OF JAMES BAY

During Marine Awareness Week in March 2025, the team shared findings from four years of climate change research on St Helena's priority marine species, providing valuable insight into how these species may respond to future environmental change. Further celebrating the island's unique biodiversity, a special stamp issue released in September 2024 featured deep-sea species discovered during a 2022 research cruise.

The publication of this second MMP Annual Report reflects the commitment of our teams, partners, and wider community, and reinforces our shared responsibility to safeguard St Helena's marine environment for generations to come.

ST HELENA WINS ICCAT TAG RETURN LOTTERY

CONVENTIONAL TUNA TAG

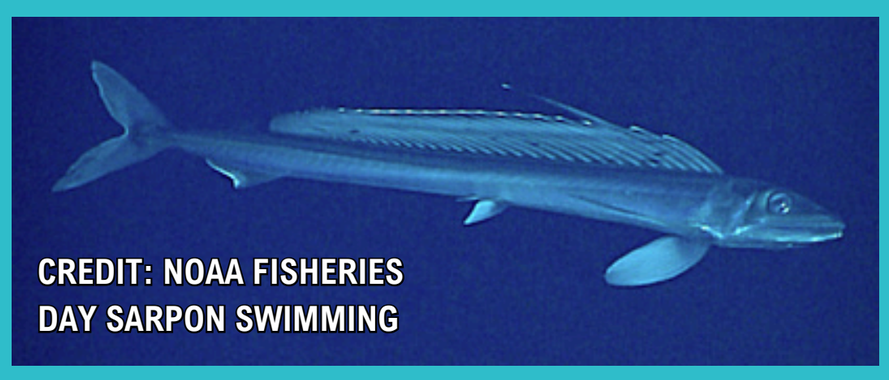
Each year, the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) runs a draw using all tag returns from its international tagging programme. ICCAT is an intergovernmental organisation responsible for the conservation and management of tuna and other highly migratory fish species across the Atlantic Ocean.

One tag number is drawn at random, and the person or organisation that returned that tag receives a monetary prize. St Helena was fortunate to be a winner this year. This marks the third time that St Helena has won, reflecting a strong rate of tag returns and the effective management of the island's tagging programme. The results highlight the success of ongoing research efforts and the value of consistent monitoring in supporting sustainable fisheries management.


DOUBLE TAGGED TUNA

INTERESTING MARINE SPECIES SIGHTINGS

Day Sarpon (Longnose lancetfish *Alepisaurus ferox*)


CREDIT: NOAA FISHERIES
DAY SARPON SWIMMING


CREDIT: NOAA FISHERIES
DAY SARPON FANGS

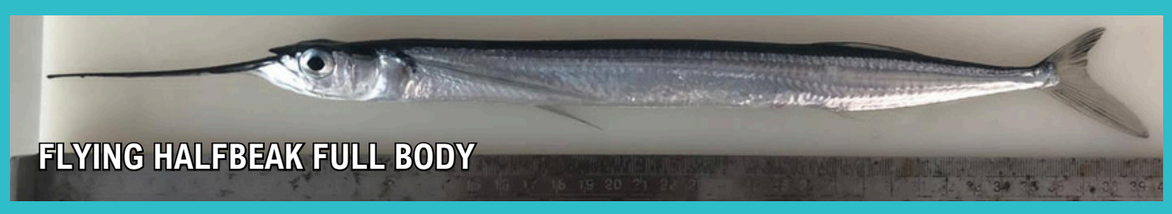
A Longnose lancetfish, locally called Day Sarpon, was recently sighted in James Bay. These iridescent fish can appear bluish or pale, with fins ranging from brown to black, and can reach a maximum length of around 2 meters. Sarpon are rarely caught around St Helena, mostly appearing on longlines used for tuna fishing, though occasional captures on handlines have been reported. These fish are widespread in tropical and subtropical waters of all oceans, rarely entering coastal waters, typically inhabiting depths of several hundred meters during the day but rise closer to the surface at night when they are more active. They are long, slender, and scaleless, reflecting their adaptations to life in the deep ocean.

Robust mora *Laemonema robustum*

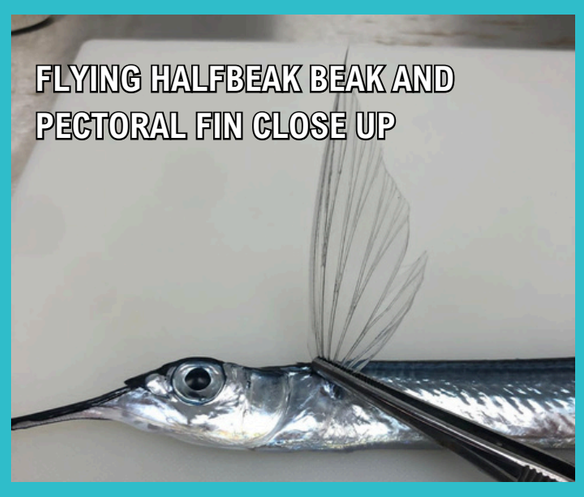
Another interesting fish sighting was reported by Mr Dorian “Duffy” Caswell, from an area locally known as ‘The Shovel’, off South West Point. He encountered a robust mora, a deep-water fish that inhabits depths ranging from the outer continental shelf down to the abyss. Robust moras are benthopelagic, meaning they live and feed near the ocean floor but also spend time swimming in the open water just above it.


CREDIT: iNATURALIST
ROBUST MORA IN DEEP SEA

The species is brownish in colour, with darker fins, and can reach a standard length of at least 36cm. Robust moras are considered rare around St Helena, with only occasional records from the eastern and central Atlantic.


FLYING HALFBEAK FULL BODY


FLYING HALFBEAK BODY CLOSE UP


FLYING HALFBEAK BEAK AND PECTORAL FIN CLOSE UP

Flying halfbeak Euleporhamphus velox

A Flying Halfbeak was recently recorded by Mr Dorian “Duffy” Caswell in local waters. This small, streamlined fish typically grows to around 15 cm in length and is easily recognised by its elongated, pointed lower jaw, which extends beyond the upper jaw to form a distinctive beak-like profile. Its body is generally silvery, marked by a faint lateral line running from head to tail that helps it blend with sunlight filtering through the water.

The well-developed pectoral fins aid in propulsion, particularly when the fish breaks the surface, reflecting its adaptation to life in the upper layers of the ocean.

MARINE CENTRE | THE WHARF | JAMESTOWN | ST HELENA ISLAND | STHL 1ZZ

TEL NO. (+290) 25966

marine@helanta.co.sh

FB @St Helena MPA | X @St Helena MPA

#sthelenampa #smallislandBIGFUTURE