



THE MARINE AND FISHERIES CONSERVATION SECTION

QUARTERLY CATCH

JANUARY - MARCH 2026

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It's a new year and this is the very first Marine and Fisheries Conservation Section's **QUARTERLY CATCH** for **JANUARY TO MARCH 2026!**

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

To kick-start the first quarter of 2026, MFCS has been exceptionally busy:

- We were pleased to welcome our new apprentice, Lauren Duncan, to the section for the year. Lauren has been supporting field and laboratory activities while gaining valuable hands-on experience in marine conservation work.
- Zooplankton (fish eggs and larvae) sampling has continued, with fieldwork scheduled to run until the end of April. Once completed, focus will shift to the laboratory, where the samples will be processed and analysed. The results from this work will inform stock assessments and help guide future fisheries management measures.
- We have also begun this year's grouper tagging work, this is also marking an expansion of tagging activities to the leeward side of the island as well as in deeper waters, this expansion will provide valuable new insights into the grouper population around the island. Lobster surveys are ongoing, and we are now in year two of our three-year survey period, building a clearer picture of lobster abundance and trends around the island over time.
- The section has hosted a range of visitors in recent months. Professor Casey Dunn from Yale University utilised our laboratory facilities to support his research on the Portuguese man-of-war. The student ship ST Vela also visited St Helena's waters, students came to the Marine Centre for a presentation and practical session, offering a valuable exchange of knowledge and experience. In addition, a representative from the Marine Management Organisation visited to work alongside both MFCS and the Marine Compliance and Enforcement Section (MC&ES), strengthening professional links and knowledge sharing.
- Of course, a major highlight of the quarter was our annual Marine Awareness Week, held in the first week of March. This year was particularly special as we celebrated 10 years of St Helena's MPA, an important milestone for the island.
- This quarter was also complemented by some exciting marine sightings, providing a fitting reminder of the remarkable marine life that the MPA was established to protect.

IN THIS ISSUE

MFCS WELCOMES OUR NEW APPRENTICE

2026 GROUPEL TAGGING EXPANDS

PROFESSOR CASEY DUNN VISITS ST HELENA TO STUDY PORTUGUESE MAN-OF-WAR

SEA|MESTER VISIT TO THE MARINE CENTRE

BLUE BELT SKILLS FRAMEWORK: ST HELENA VISIT

MARINE AWARENESS WEEK 2026: CELEBRATING 10 YEARS OF ST HELENA'S MPA

INTERESTING SIGHTINGS

MFCS WELCOMES OUR NEW APPRENTICE

Lauren Duncan has joined the section as an apprentice through the blended learning route offered by Career Access St Helena (CASH), a local service that provides employment-related support and opportunities on St Helena. This pathway allows her to combine formal studies with practical, on-the-job experience.



Lauren will be with us for one year, during which she will gain hands-on experience in both fieldwork and data processing. We hope she will enjoy her time with the team, develop new skills and knowledge, and bring fresh ideas to the section. We are very pleased to have an additional pair of hands to support our ongoing monitoring and conservation work, and we look forward to working with her during the time she is with us.



2026 GROUPEY TAGGING EXPANDS

We have now commenced our 2026 grouper tagging work, building on previous efforts that focused mainly on shallow waters on the windward side of the island. This year, we are extending surveys to the leeward side and targeting deeper waters, allowing us to compare grouper populations between the two sides of St Helena.



Alongside key data collection on tagging and catch per unit effort (CPUE), part of this work is assessing the effects of barotrauma, something that can occur when fish are brought up from deeper water too quickly. At greater depths, fish experience higher pressure, and gases in their swim bladders expand rapidly if they are brought to the surface too fast. This can cause internal injuries or make it difficult for fish to swim. To reduce this risk, we have developed a device called a grouper descender, essentially a "fish elevator". This tool allows the fish's swim bladder to adjust gradually as they are lowered back to deeper water, rather than forcing the fish to swim down themselves. This method has already proven successful for fish caught in waters of 20m or less.

These surveys will now be conducted two days per month, one day on the leeward side and one on the windward side, doubling the frequency of our monitoring. The expanded effort will strengthen our understanding of grouper populations around the island.

PROFESSOR CASEY DUNN VISITS ST HELENA TO STUDY PORTUGUESE MAN-OF-WAR

We were pleased to welcome Prof. Casey Dunn from Yale University to St Helena, who visited the island to further his research on *Physalia* (more commonly known as bluebottles or Portuguese man-of-war).

The open ocean covers approximately 75% of the Earth's surface, yet we still know remarkably little about the organisms that inhabit it. Advances in scientific tools that have now enabled scientists to study DNA alongside physical characteristics, are revealing that ocean biodiversity is far richer than previously recognised.

Professor Dunn's laboratory has recently shown that *Physalia*, long considered a single, globally distributed species, actually comprises at least five distinct species. Three of these occur in the South Atlantic, though their full ranges are still being determined. St Helena is pivotal to this research, providing a key location for understanding species range boundaries and advancing knowledge of global ocean biodiversity.





During his visit, Professor Dunn carried out fieldwork to support his research. He collected specimens from Sandy Bay Beach and also went on an inshore trip around the island with our Fisheries Science Programme Coordinator, Jake Letori, to obtain live samples from the surrounding waters.

The visit also included a public talk at the Museum and to GCSE Marine Science students, where Professor Dunn shared insights into his lab's latest discoveries in open-ocean biodiversity and explained how genetic science is reshaping our understanding of species once thought to be globally uniform.

SEAJMESTER VISIT TO THE MARINE CENTRE

Sea|mester visited St Helena aboard the STV Vela, as part of its at-sea academic programme, which combines higher education studies with practical seamanship, sailing and marine science experience. Students aboard their training vessels earn college credits through the University of South Florida while travelling across oceans and engaging directly with marine environments around the world.



As part of this learning model, they also take part in port visits which provide opportunities to gain insight into marine conservation in different regions. During their time in St Helena's waters, the group visited the Marine Centre to learn more about the island's MPA and the work undertaken to conserve and manage its marine resources.



Our Marine and Fisheries Conservation Officer, Adam Riggs, delivered a presentation providing an overview of the conservation and fisheries management work carried out on St Helena. This was followed by a bait fish sampling practical session led by members of our scientific team. Students observed and participated in the collection and recording of biological data, including measuring length and weight, extracting otoliths for age analysis and determining sex and maturity stages by extracting the fishes' gonads (reproductive organs).

The session provided a practical demonstration of how some of the scientific data is gathered on St Helena, while also offering students valuable hands-on experience aligned with their marine studies programme.

BLUE BELT SKILLS FRAMEWORK: ST HELENA VISIT

As part of the Blue Belt Programme workplan, the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) has been developing a skills framework across the UK Overseas Territories (UKOTs) that the Blue Belt Programmes supports. The framework aims to identify skills gaps and explore opportunities for training and knowledge exchange between territories in the field of marine conservation. This approach has already been applied in the Western Indian Ocean, and its implementation across all UKOTs is now being explored.

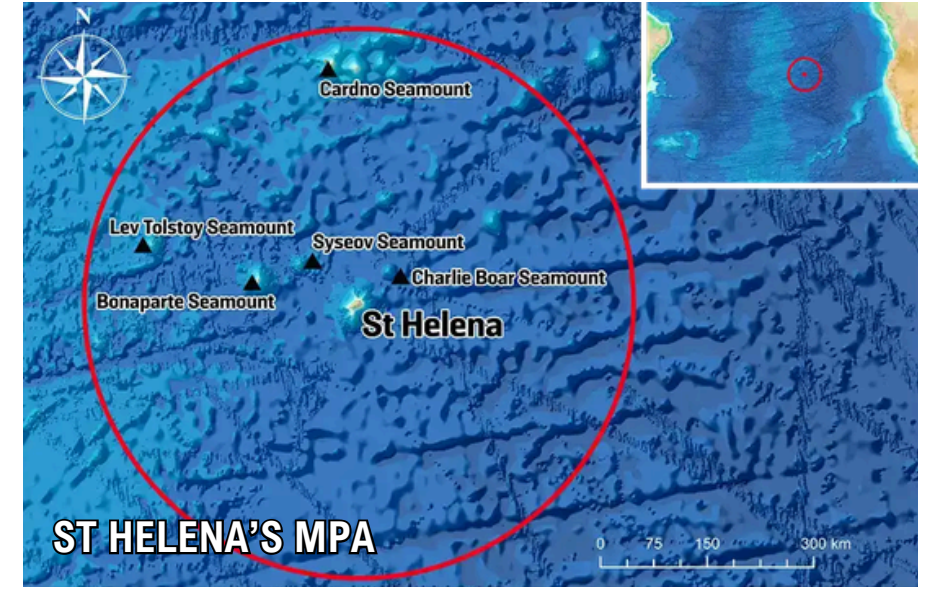
To support this work, Lawrence Sisitka, an outside contractor, who has worked in the West Indian Ocean region, visited St Helena in January to gain an overview of how the island's MPA is managed, the roles of different teams and team members, and the skills required for each position.

Lawrence joined routine activities to observe a typical working week and held brief one-to-one discussions with team members to better understand their responsibilities and how they contribute to the management of the MPA.

Both MFCS and MC&ES had the opportunity to review the skills framework, identifying the skills required for different roles, assessing their relevance, and considering how they apply in the St Helena context. The teams also highlighted any gaps that could be addressed through future training or knowledge exchange opportunities.

MARINE AWARENESS WEEK 2026: CELEBRATING 10 YEARS OF ST HELENA'S MPA

Marine Awareness Week 2026 marked a significant milestone for marine conservation in St Helena, celebrating ten years since the designation of the island's MPA. Established in 2016, the MPA encompasses St Helena's entire Exclusive Economic Zone of 200 nautical miles, covering 448,411 km², an area the size of France.



To mark the anniversary, a week of activities brought together schools, community groups, decision-makers and members of the public.



A central feature was a marine and fisheries conservation timeline, charting the section's development from its establishment in the 1990s to the present day. The display highlighted the breadth of projects delivered over the years, as well as the ongoing work that continues to safeguard St Helena's marine environment.

Education and engagement were at the heart of the week. A total of 22 school groups attended, including Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 classes, students from St Helena Secondary School and home-schooled learners. Following a short introduction to the timeline, students were invited to share what they value most about the ocean.

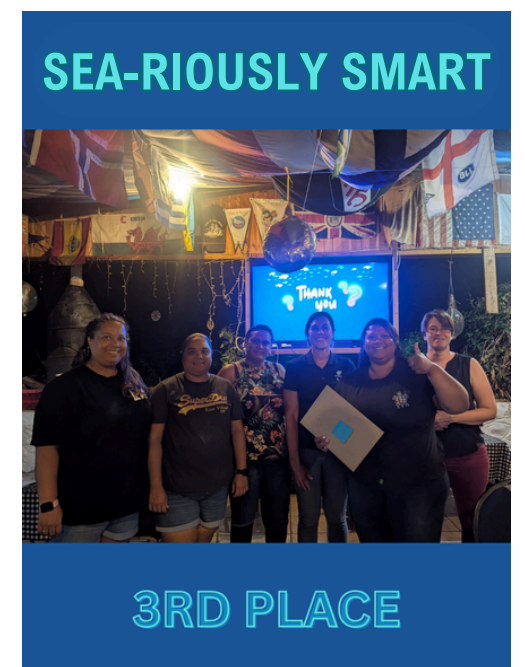


Their responses were displayed in the Porteous House window throughout Marine Awareness Week and the following week, serving as a visible reminder of the community's connection to the sea. Younger children also took part in creative activities, colouring local fish species and crafting their own fish and jellyfish, while interactive games and outdoor sessions brought energy and enjoyment to the learning experience.



A range of community-focused events complemented the school activities. An information session brought together Ministers, Councillors and key stakeholders to reflect on progress and future priorities. A fishers' social combined presentations with practical discussion, before continuing informally at the Yacht Club and Dive Club. With food and refreshments provided, the event encouraged open and constructive dialogue within the fishing community.

The week also featured a well-attended Quiz Night, delivered in partnership with the Good Tern Charity at Ann's Place. Twelve teams took part in a lively evening of competition, raising over £350 through entry fees, raffle ticket sales, donations and even an impromptu auction. Activities also continued into the weekend.



A disco hosted by New Horizons on Friday evening added to the celebratory atmosphere. On Saturday, attention turned to ocean stewardship, with a wharf clean-up in Jamestown and James Bay. Volunteers from the St Helena Rainbows, Brownies and Guides, Scouts, the St Helena Dive Club and the wider community worked both along the shoreline and underwater to remove litter and debris.



The celebrations concluded with a sponsored swim organised by the Yellow Fins Swimming Club. More than 40 swimmers took part, providing a vibrant and fitting finale to a week of celebrating ten years of St Helena's Marine Protected Area.

INTERESTING SIGHTINGS

Mystery Marine Mammal at Sandy Bay



In February, a washed-up marine mammal was reported to MFCS at Sandy Bay Beach, prompting a team visit to investigate. The MFCS team documented the scene with photographs, collected relevant samples, and safely removed the animal from the beach.

The specimen has now been positively identified as a Bottlenose dolphin, with confirmation provided through photo identification by Simon Elwen PhD, at Stellenbosch University.

We thank the members of the public who promptly reported the sighting, which enabled the team to respond quickly and carry out necessary investigations.

Rare Sighting During Lobster Dive

During our lobster dives in March, the team encountered not one, but two live specimens of *Tonna pennata*! A type of tun shell, a large marine snail known for its thin, lightweight, balloon-like shell and impressive size.

One individual appeared to be actively hunting, with its mantle fully spread (which is a soft, fleshy layer covering the snail's body that extends beyond the shell, helping it to move, sense its surroundings, and capture prey). This specimen measured approximately 25 cm across.



Deep-Sea Creature at Jamestown Swimming Pool



A very unusual sighting occurred recently at the Jamestown swimming pool when a deep-sea species was found far outside its normal habitat, usually living approximately 200-1000m deep. The specimen had fallen from a seabird's nest, which had been built on the pool wall, before being discovered by one of the pool lifeguards, Donny O'Bey.

While further identification is ongoing, this rare and unexpected event highlights the sometimes-surprising ways marine life can appear on St Helena.

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