

Meeting with Minister Darragh O'Brien TD
on the Malahide Estuary shore Dec 17th 2021
Report by Karin Dubsy, images by Pete Bedell.

On Friday 17th December 2021 a Coastwatch delegation met Minister Darragh O'Brien in the Malahide estuary. This was to give the Minister a preview of the Coastwatch autumn survey 2021 'high and low lights' and consider some of the key asks the group had agreed in a seagrass workshop 2 days earlier.

Passing hundreds of grazing and chatting Brent geese below the shore road, our Coastwatch delegation settled on the edge of a saltmarsh, to avoid disturbing them.



Figure 1 Minister Darragh O'Brien TD with Coastwatch delegation giving a preview of autumn survey high and low lights.

After introductions, Karin Dubsy, Coastwatch Coordinator, outlined some of the latest Coastwatch autumn shore survey high and low lights to the minister. We noted the

great turn out for this annual shore audit, with 710 survey sites included in the result analyses and growing knowledge among the citizen scientists as many marine biologists and geographers are acting



as regional coordinators! Michael Walsh noted that even in a well-studied area like the Fingal coast which he coordinates, there was scope for important new findings. For example - one sea scout Molly Hooper (middle of final photo) had discovered a new seagrass patch at the tip of the Malahide Burrow.

The acres of intertidal seagrass lawn we had talked about in our seagrass workshop 2 days earlier had been grazed down to their rhizomes, especially on the upper shore, which is available to the geese for the longest time each tide. Luckily, we found a few patches they missed.

We also explained that the 2021 autumn shore survey was running alongside our new Seagrass Campaign, started in May. Between the two Coastwatch citizen science projects a suite of new seagrass beds had been discovered by volunteers in counties Dublin, Wexford, Cork, Kerry, Clare, Galway and Donegal. Surveyors had also recorded significant



Figure 2 Minister Darragh O'Brien at a patch of *Zostera noltii* seagrass with Coastwatchers Michael Walsh, Aoife Powell and Karin Dubsy in Malahide estuary and 1(b) *Z. noltii*.

expansions of some known seagrass beds, while other beds had declined in health and extent. The minister was excited about the seagrass findings and the wealth of mudflat life where we stood. Getting into shore search mode, he dabbed a *Hydrobia* mud snail, the size of a pin head, onto the tip

of his finger and studied the remains of a Glasswort *Salicornia* plant in what looked like a stand of miniature dead Xmas trees. This was his backyard where he had grown up, he explained.



Figure 3 Minister O'Brien TD examining a long dried *Z. marina* plant. Photo Pete Bedell

Just to contrast the *Zostera noltii* lawn with a *Zostera marina* meadow, Karin gave the Minister a dried *Zostera marina* plant from South Wexford and told him that the tallest seagrass meadow found by Coastwatchers in 2021 was 1.75 m high in Quilty, Co. Clare.

Regarding low lights, we flagged that surveyors still return the threat of erosion as the most common threat to the shore and we do not have an erosion management policy or even a forum to explore how to tackle it.

Another low light was water pollution - with sewage pollution raised most often as a concern. The spread of alien species was noted in an increasing number of sites. *Spartina* grass – as seen in the sward close to where we were standing in Malahide estuary - appears to be expanding into more intertidal seagrass beds along East and South coast, while the tall *Sargassum muticum* seaweed, at home in the Pacific, was observed in more sites and forming thick floating mats, shading out seagrass in some *Zostera* meadows in the summer.

Marine litter results featured mainly in high lights as there was less dumping and less litter found across a range of categories including all Single Use Plastic (SUP) Directive controlled items, such as cotton bud sticks, drink straws and polystyrene cups recorded by surveyors. A few low lights were the increase in facemask litter and dog poo bags recorded.

Follow up Action

The Minister asked searching questions, was well briefed, informed us and is in the process of addressing some issues, while open to consider others. On **threat of erosion**, he explained that the OPW has been tasked with preparing a status report and an interdepartmental committee had been established to draft a policy. He added that Coastwatch would get an opportunity to present survey findings and erosion relevant recommendations to the committee as one step towards more public participation which he is committed to.

On **sewage**, he noted things would improve significantly in the very near future. The Ringsend plant upgrade had just been completed and would come on stream in early 2022. Also he had recently turned the first sod for the Arklow WWTP. The boaty people in the Coastwatch delegation – sea scout Nick Hooper and sailor Jonathan Mason were particularly delighted to think that soon there won't be raw sewage greeting those mooring. It opens up rafts of opportunities for Arklow they agreed.

Coastwatch was also invited to submit maps with issues such as raw sewage and frequent overflow locations.

On **protection and management of seagrass as blue carbon** habitat the issue Coastwatchers had worked at hardest in 2021, the Minister committed to find a date in mid-January suitable for both him and Minister Malcolm Noonan to meet with Coastwatchers, go through findings, with protection and management proposals to consider these in more detail.

On launching our result high and low lights - yes he had met us, found the citizen science really impressive and would launch results for us. It was an enthusiastic yes.

We thanked the minister in English and Irish with TY intern Aoife Powell doing the latter. We left more confident about the plans to help bring our seas back to good health than we started, both by what was said and the interested natural open-minded attitude of the Minister and his staff we had witnessed.

Our Coastwatch survey results high and low lights launch, with the Minister's address will be on www.coastwatch.org on the last week of December. _____