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#NNF3 Connecting Conwy: A Plan for Seascape-Scale Recovery of Coastal Habitats in Conwy Bay and the Menai Strait **Project Evaluation Report 2024-2026**



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In Partnership with
Welsh Government

Author(s) name: Celine Gamble¹, Maria Hayden-Hughes², Rhianna Parry²

Editor(s): Anna Cucknell¹, Stuart Jenkins²

Author(s) affiliation: ¹Zoological Society of London (ZSL), ²School of Ocean Sciences, Bangor University

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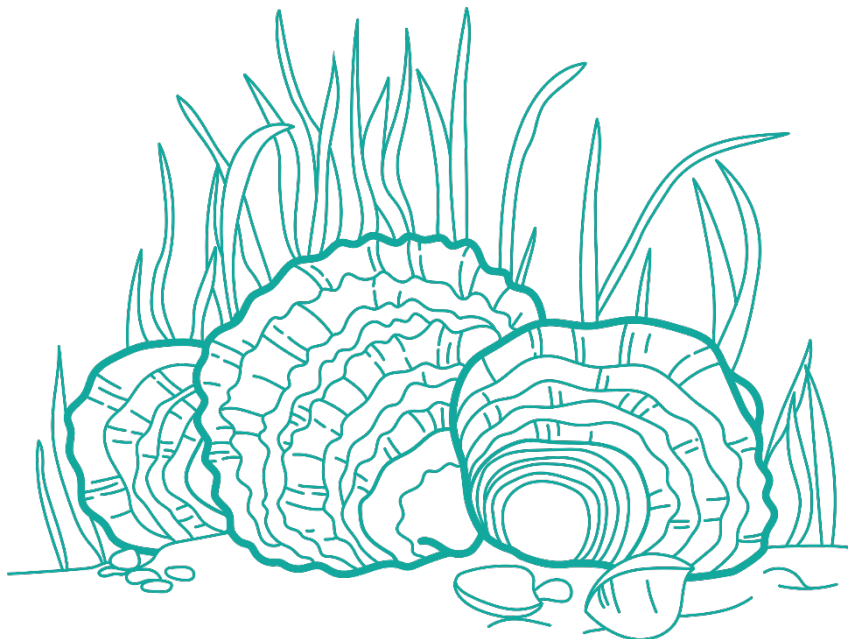
Executive summary

This report outlines the scientific, environmental and societal achievements of the #NNF3 Connecting Conwy project, a collaboration between the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) and Bangor University. The project aimed to lay the foundations for long-term seascape-scale recovery of coastal and marine habitats across the Menai Strait and Conwy Bay Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

Delivered between July 2024 and May 2026, the project took a broader, multi-habitat approach, focusing on improving understanding of priority marine habitats, including native oysters, seagrass, saltmarsh and blue mussel habitats. Building on restoration and engagement work established through the Wild Oysters Project: Conwy Bay (2020–2023) and #NNF2 Restoring Wild Oysters to Conwy Bay (2023–2025), the project advanced the scientific evidence, partnerships and local knowledge required to support future seascape-scale restoration planning in North Wales.

Key achievements included the completion of habitat suitability modelling for native oyster and dwarf eelgrass habitats, alongside targeted ground-truthing surveys; a comprehensive desk-based review of marine habitat extent and condition; a native oyster survivability trial in the Menai Strait; continued post-deployment monitoring of the Conwy Bay oyster restoration site; a knowledge exchange workshop involving local key actors; and a broad programme of education, citizen science and public engagement activities reaching over 1,100 people.

This report shares both achievements and key learnings aiming to inform future seascape recovery efforts in Menai Strait and Conwy Bay, North Wales and beyond.



Project background

The Menai Strait and Conwy Bay Special Area of Conservation (SAC) is a nationally and internationally important marine landscape supporting a rich assemblage of coastal and marine habitats, including native oyster reefs, seagrass beds, saltmarsh, blue mussel beds and associated biodiversity. Despite their ecological significance, many of these habitats have undergone severe decline over recent decades due to overexploitation, declining water quality, invasive non-native species and the cumulative impacts of climate change.

The Wild Oysters Project: Conwy Bay (2020–2023) established oyster nurseries at Conwy and Deganwy Marinas, trained citizen scientists and laid the groundwork for future restoration activities. Building on this, the #NNF2 Restoring Wild Oysters to Conwy Bay project (2023–2025) delivered the first small-scale native oyster seabed restoration trial in the area through the deployment of 45m³ of cultch and 2,000 native oysters within Conwy Bay.

The #NNF3 Connecting Conwy project represented a shift from single-species restoration towards a broader seascape-scale recovery approach. Working with local communities, partners, regulators and actors across Conwy, Gwynedd and Ynys Môn, the project aimed to strengthen the scientific evidence base, build local partnerships and develop a shared understanding of the opportunities and constraints associated with restoring the diversity, extent, condition and connectivity of priority marine habitats across the Menai Strait and Conwy Bay SAC.



Aerial view of the Menai Strait (left), Prince Madog (middle) © Bangor University, and aerial view of the Conwy Estuary (right) © Deganwy Marina.

Project goals, activities and outputs

The #NNF3 Connecting Conwy project aimed to lay the foundations for future long-term recovery and health of coastal and marine habitats in the Menai Strait and Conwy Bay, by bringing together scientific evidence, local knowledge, and partnership working.

Goal 1: Improve understanding of the presence, condition, distribution, and recovery barriers of key marine habitats in the Menai Strait and Conwy Bay, including seagrass, saltmarsh, blue mussel beds, and native oyster reefs.

Activities	Outputs
Produce a desk-based habitat study, summarising existing literature, datasets and habitat suitability models.	Completed desk study, titled: A review of marine habitats to inform habitat suitability modelling for the Connecting Conwy Project.
Produce updated habitat suitability assessments and complete targeted surveys to ground-truth habitat suitability models.	Completed two habitat suitability assessments and subsequent ground-truthing, reports titled: Habitat suitability modelling for restoration of <i>Ostrea edulis</i> in North Wales; <i>Zostera noltii</i> Habitat Suitability Modelling in North Wales
Deliver an Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) citizen science training workshop.	Delivered two INNS workshops with Amgueddfa Cymru, supporting monitoring, biosecurity and upskilling: • Engaged 33 participants. • 100% improved knowledge • 89% increased confidence in identifying marine invasive species
Deliver a knowledge exchange workshop and knowledge exchange meetings, bringing together restoration practitioners, eNGOs, industry, government organisations and regulators.	A preliminary workshop hosted at Bangor University, with 22 attendees, representing 12 local organisations. Report titled: 'Connecting Conwy' Preliminary Workshop Summary Report. 27 knowledge exchange meetings, with 17 organisations and local actors.

Goal 2: Use the Native Oyster Restoration Site as a case study to monitor outcomes, test methods and inform future restoration efforts.

Activities	Outputs
Oyster nursery monitoring at Conwy and Deganwy Marinas	10 monitoring sessions completed
Monitoring of the native oyster restoration trial site in Conwy Bay	Multibeam survey Drop-down survey ROV survey BRUV survey
Native oyster survival trial in the Menai Strait	Oyster survival trial at the Bangor University Research Raft in Menai Bridge – 6 months, showing 70% survival. Completed report, titled: NNF3 Connecting Conwy: Oyster Survival Trials in the Menai Strait SAC – Science Summary Report 2025-2026

Goal 3: Engage and involve a wide range of people in understanding, valuing and shaping the recovery of local marine habitats.

Activities	Outputs
Collaborate with local events to raise awareness of the local marine environment.	Total number of people engaged 1,132, through 24 outreach events, contributing to 1,932 total engagement interactions across all project activities.
Deliver bilingual education sessions to local schools and education providers.	Total number of students engaged 164, through 5 education sessions.
Deliver citizen science opportunities.	105 citizen scientists engaged, through 10 oyster nursery monitoring volunteering sessions.
Recruit and train summer interns.	4 interns trained 3 at Bangor University 1 at ZSL

Summary of project delivery

Goal 1: Understand marine habitat presence, condition and distribution

This project aimed to assess the future potential for seascape-scale recovery within and around the Menai Strait and Conwy Bay SAC. The project responded to the significant historical decline of marine habitats across the UK, including native oyster reefs, seagrass meadows, saltmarsh habitats, and blue mussel beds (Figure 1). Goal 1 of the project sought to strengthen the evidence base required to support potential marine restoration planning in North Wales.



Figure 1. Marine habitats investigated: (left) Native oyster, *Ostrea edulis* (© Rhianna Parry), Blue mussel, *Mytilus edulis* (© Maria Hayden-Hughes), Seagrass, *Zostera* spp. (© Jake Davies), Saltmarsh (© Rhianna Parry) (right).

Desk-based marine habitat review and evidence synthesis

The initial phase of the project focused on completing a desk-based evidence review to improve understanding of the extent, condition and distribution of key coastal habitats across the region's saltmarsh, seagrass, native oyster reefs and blue mussel habitats. The study reviewed and consolidated a broad range of existing datasets, methodologies and habitat suitability maps to refine current opportunity layers and identify priority evidence gaps. This included examining scientific literature, historical records, ecological monitoring data, seabed and hydrodynamic datasets, environmental and anthropogenic pressures and habitat suitability approaches.

The review draws upon existing work already undertaken by Bangor University, Natural Resources Wales (NRW), Project Seagrass, Seagrass Ocean Rescue, North Wales Wildlife Trust, North Wales Rivers Trust, the Native Oyster Network UK & Ireland, local fisheries, partnerships and community initiatives across North Wales. It also built on learning from restoration efforts, including #NNF2 *Restoring Wild Oysters to Conwy Bay*, regional seagrass initiatives, and local citizen science programmes.

The desk study highlighted both the value and limitations of habitat suitability modelling for marine restoration planning. Habitat suitability models are valuable tools for predicting

potential restoration areas; however, their effectiveness remains dependent on the quality, availability, and spatial resolution of datasets used. The review identified several evidence gaps remaining across the target marine habitats, particularly relating to high-resolution environmental datasets, species occurrence records and intertidal habitat coverage. As a result, the report emphasises the importance of ground-truthing and site-specific surveys to validate model outputs and strengthen restoration planning.

Findings from this desk-based study have informed the development of high-resolution habitat suitability models for native oyster, *Ostrea edulis*, and dwarf eelgrass, *Zostera noltii*, led by Bangor University. These model outputs were validated by initial targeted ground-truthing surveys, helping to support potential collaborative, seascape-scale marine recovery planning in North Wales. By improving understanding of habitat connectivity and restoration potential, the project aims to contribute to longer-term efforts to support more resilient coastal ecosystems and communities.

For further information, see report: *A review of marine habitats to inform habitat suitability modelling for the Connecting Conwy Project.*

Habitat suitability modelling and initial ground-truthing for potential restoration of *Ostrea edulis* in North Wales

A habitat suitability assessment was undertaken to help identify areas along the North Wales coastline that may support potential restoration of the native oyster (*Ostrea edulis*).

A high-resolution habitat suitability model was developed using available environmental data to improve understanding of where conditions may support native oyster survival and potential reef development. The model combined datasets relating to bathymetry, tidal currents, bed shear stress, salinity, temperature, dissolved oxygen, chlorophyll-*a*, suspended sediments and seabed substrate alongside historic native oyster occurrence records. The resulting model was produced at a 30 m grid resolution to provide a more detailed regional assessment of potential habitat suitability.

Model outputs indicated that approximately 3,276 km² of the North Wales study area had environmental conditions potentially suitable for native oyster restoration. Areas highlighted by the model include parts of Caernarfon Bay, areas south of the Llŷn Peninsula, east of Bardsey Island, from the northwestern part of Tremadog Bay to the south of Pwllheli and areas east of Cilan Head. Historic native oyster records were found to broadly align with several areas identified by the model as potentially suitable, providing some supporting evidence for the outputs generated (Figure 2).

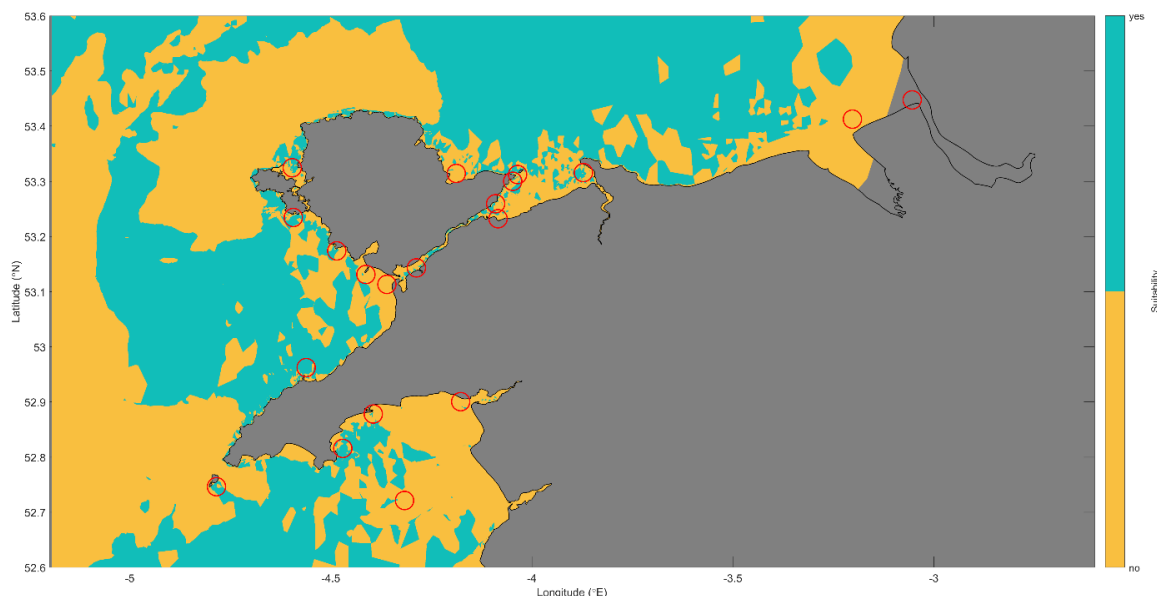


Figure 2. Combined habitat suitability based on hydrodynamics and seabed substrate. Red circles denote historical oyster beds.

Initial ground-truthing surveys undertaken in Menai West identified the presence of subtidal mixed sediment habitats that could support native oysters. However, surveys also identified practical and operational considerations, including strong tidal currents and limited slack-water periods, which would present challenges for delivering seabed restoration, monitoring and long-term site management.

These initial findings are intended to provide an early evidence base to guide further research rather than define restoration sites at this stage. Additional ground-truthing surveys, local actor engagement and assessment of operational, regulatory and environmental constraints will be required before any potential restoration areas could be considered for future prioritisation.

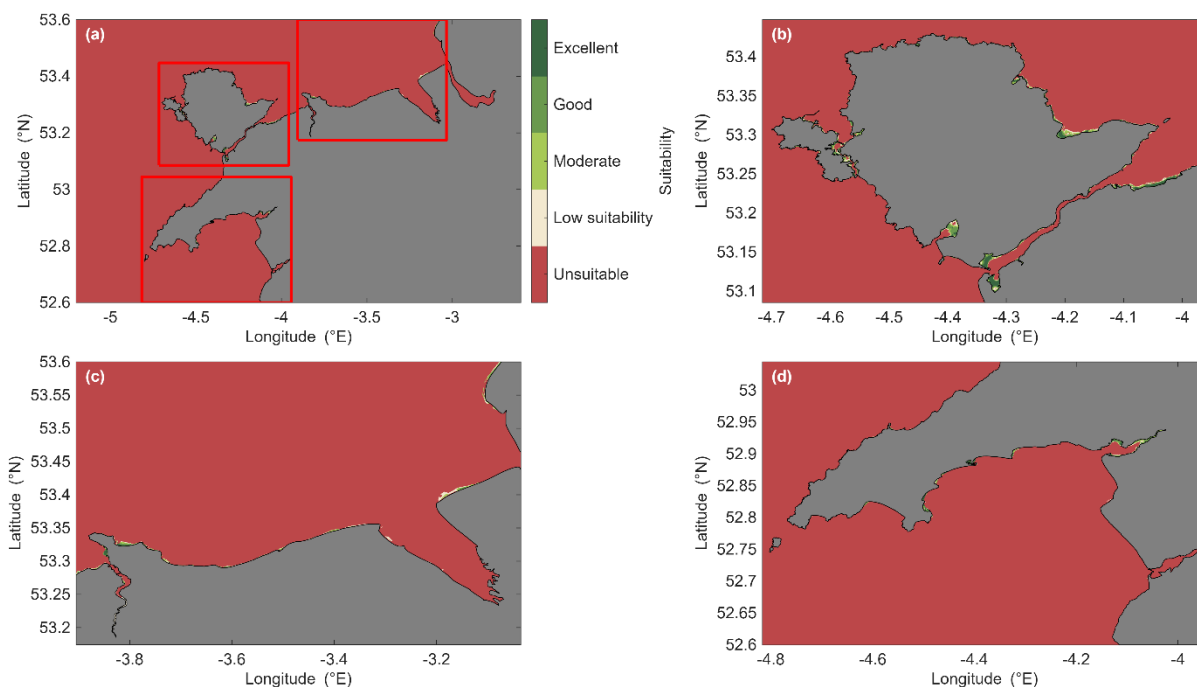
For further information, see report: [*Habitat suitability modelling for restoration of *Ostrea edulis* in North Wales.*](#)

Habitat suitability modelling and initial ground-truthing for potential restoration of *Zostera noltii* in North Wales

A habitat suitability assessment was undertaken to help identify areas along the North Wales coastline that may support conservation and restoration planning of the dwarf eelgrass (*Zostera noltii*). Other habitat suitability models have focused on the seagrass species common eelgrass (*Z. marina*), with limited studies for dwarf eelgrass.

Occurrence records from Natural Resources Wales were combined with nine environmental predictors, including bathymetry, bed shear stress, salinity, temperature, total suspended matter (TSM), sediment composition, current speed, slope, and distance to shore. All datasets were standardised to a 30 m resolution grid to support fine-scale modelling across the North Wales coastline. To reduce spatial bias, presence records were refined to 95 independent occurrences prior to modelling.

An ensemble modelling framework implemented in R using the R package sdm integrated six modelling approaches to strengthen confidence in the outputs. The model identified that potentially suitable habitat concentrated within shallow, sheltered coastal and estuarine environments, with key areas highlighted around Anglesey, the Llŷn Peninsula, and the Conwy Estuary (Figure 3). Water depth was identified as the dominant predictor of habitat suitability, followed by bed shear stress and salinity. Predicted suitable habitat was generally associated with shallow water, stable sediment conditions, and low to moderate hydrodynamic energy.



*Figure 3. Predicted suitability of *Z. noltii* habitat from the ensemble model using the threshold optimisation method (0.43 threshold), with unsuitable habitat categorised as unsuitable and 4 class of suitable habitats "low", "moderate", "good" and "excellent": (a) North Wales study area, (b) zoomed view of Anglesey, (c) Llŷn Peninsula and Cardigan Bay, and (d) coastline from Colwyn Bay to Liverpool Bay.*

Initial ground-truthing assessment focused on the Menai Strait and Conwy Bay SAC. Model outputs were reviewed alongside existing datasets relating to seagrass distribution, marine protected areas, shellfisheries, navigational infrastructure, historic assets and recreational boating. This assessment helped validate fine-scale model predictions while

also identifying areas where restoration activity may be constrained by operational or regulatory considerations.

The findings provide an early evidence base to guide future surveys of site-specific pressures and environmental conditions, local actor engagement, and restoration planning.

For further information, see report: *Zostera noltii Habitat Suitability Modelling in North Wales.*

Local actor mapping and knowledge exchange

The Menai Strait and Conwy Bay area has a wide range of organisations, industries, researchers, regulators and local community interests. Recognising the importance of collaborative working in developing a future seascape recovery approach, the project undertook an initial actor mapping exercise during the early stages of delivery.

The project aimed to identify organisations, sectors and partnerships locally and apply ZSL's Fairer Conservation Framework to future engagement planning. Local actors were identified and categorised, see Table 1.

Table 1. Actor groups identified through the mapping exercise.

Category	Number of actors identified
Government agencies (national, provincial, local)	11
Local actors	10
Private Sector	12
Fisheries & Aquaculture	15
Civil Society Organisations	24
Academia/ Universities	4

Subsequently, actors were grouped into preliminary, primary and secondary categories to support future engagement planning and identify organisations most directly connected to future seascape recovery development at appropriate stages of engagement.

After completion of the local actor mapping exercise, 27 knowledge-exchange meetings were delivered between July 2024 and April 2026. This included one-to-one meetings, preliminary workshop discussions and wider regional forums involving 17 organisations and actors across different sectors.

The meetings explored existing activities, priorities, challenges and future opportunities relating to marine recovery and management across North Wales. Discussions highlighted a strong network of organisations already working across marine conservation, fisheries, aquaculture, habitat recovery, research, community engagement and coastal management, alongside shared recognition that coordination between projects remained limited. Many organisations expressed interest in improving communication, sharing learnings, reducing duplication and strengthening collaboration.

Recurring themes included uncertainty around short-term funding cycles and project continuity, the need for long-term monitoring and sustained partnerships, and ongoing pressures linked to water quality, and catchment impacts across the SAC. The aquaculture industry highlighted practical delivery considerations, including permitting, recovery feasibility and operational constraints within working marine environments, while NGO, research and local authority discussions focused on evidence gaps, habitat mapping, coordination of recovery activities and opportunities to strengthen community engagement and stewardship.

Overall, the engagement process strengthened relationships between organisations, improved understanding of existing activity across the SAC and helped establish shared context ahead of the preliminary actor workshop.

Best practice participation training — Dialogue Matters course

To strengthen the project team's skills in workshop facilitation, public participation and key actor engagement, members of the team, including interns, completed a training course delivered by Dialogue Matters Ltd. The training provided practical tools and frameworks for inclusive facilitation and participatory process design, covering group dynamics, power imbalances, negotiation techniques, facilitation skills, and engagement methods across the participation cycle, including idea generation, prioritisation and consensus-building.

The knowledge gained has strengthened the project team's ability to facilitate inclusive local actor discussions and co-design processes, directly supporting the project's long-term aims around collaborative marine habitat recovery and community participation.

Preliminary knowledge exchange workshop

The project convened a preliminary workshop on 13th January 2026 at Bangor University, School of Ocean Sciences, facilitated by Dialogue Matters Ltd. The workshop brought together 22 participants from across Conwy, Gwynedd and Ynys Môn. Attendees included representatives from Natural Resources Wales, North Wales Wildlife Trust, North Wales

Rivers Trust, Pen Llŷn a'r Sarnau SAC, The Crown Estate, the Menai Strait Fishery Order Management Association, local authorities, and Seagrass Network Cymru (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Participants attending the Connecting Conwy Preliminary Workshop at Bangor University, School of Ocean Sciences © Rhianna Parry.

Together, participants shared local knowledge and experience, reflected on current and past recovery efforts, and explored opportunities, challenges and potential next steps toward a more joined-up, seascape-scale approach to nature recovery in North Wales.

Through the workshop, the project aimed to:

- Build a shared understanding of what a seascape approach means in a North Wales context
- Share perspectives on where recovery, restoration, monitoring and research are already happening
- Explore what is working well, key challenges and opportunities
- Identify potential opportunities to work more closely together

Through four facilitated sessions, participants discussed future visions for a recovered coast, mapped current habitat recovery activity, reflected on existing strengths and barriers, and discussed opportunities for greater collaboration at seascape-scale. Discussions highlighted strengths including collaboration, ocean literacy, citizen science and university partnerships, alongside challenges relating to fragmented funding, coordination, delivery infrastructure and community engagement.

Participants identified existing foundations for seascape recovery, including active habitat recovery projects, supportive Welsh policy frameworks and collaborative working across the region. Key themes included the importance of habitat suitability mapping, improving coordination between projects and action plans, investing in meaningful community engagement, and the need for stronger engagement with fishers, local authorities and Welsh Government to support long-term seascape recovery.

Final feedback demonstrated strong support for continuing collaborative discussions, with 20 of 22 participants expressing interest in future engagement opportunities.

For further information, see report: *Connecting Conwy Preliminary Workshop — Summary Report* (Dialogue Matters / ZSL / Bangor University, 2026)

Goal 1: Insights and lessons learnt

- 1. Early and ongoing local actor engagement is essential.** Actor mapping, one-to-one meetings and workshops helped identify key organisations, build relationships and strengthen collaboration. Combining different engagement approaches supported broader participation and highlighted the value of coordinating activities across projects to reduce information fatigue. Existing networks and partnerships also demonstrated the need for a longer-term seascape-scale knowledge exchange network.
- 2. Habitat suitability models are valuable, but require validation.** Habitat suitability modelling provided an effective way to identify potential restoration opportunities and prioritise future survey effort. However, model outputs should be considered indicative until validated through ground-truthing surveys and site-specific assessments.
- 3. Improved environmental data will strengthen future restoration planning.** The project highlighted limitations in the availability, resolution and processing of environmental datasets. Future modelling would benefit from higher-resolution environmental data, larger spatial coverage and improved validation methods to increase confidence in model outputs.
- 4. Future restoration planning must balance ecological, logistical and social considerations.** Ground-truthing demonstrated that environmentally suitable sites may still face constraints relating to logistics, regulation, land ownership, existing marine uses and climate change. Future restoration planning should therefore be place-based, collaborative and informed by both ecological evidence and local knowledge.

Goal 2: Use the native oyster restoration site as a case study

Goal 2 used an existing native oyster restoration site in Conwy Bay as a case study to understand restoration techniques, biodiversity benefits, and feasibility of future oyster recovery efforts. Activities included monitoring the restoration and control sites, continued oyster nursery monitoring, disease testing and a survival trial in the Menai Strait.

Ongoing monitoring of oyster nurseries and the restoration site in Conwy Bay:

Oyster nursery monitoring

An oyster nursery is a micro-habitat containing mature oysters, which will reproduce and release oyster larvae (Figure 5). Between August 2024 and May 2026, an average of 1,700 oysters were housed in nurseries across Conwy and Deganwy marinas.

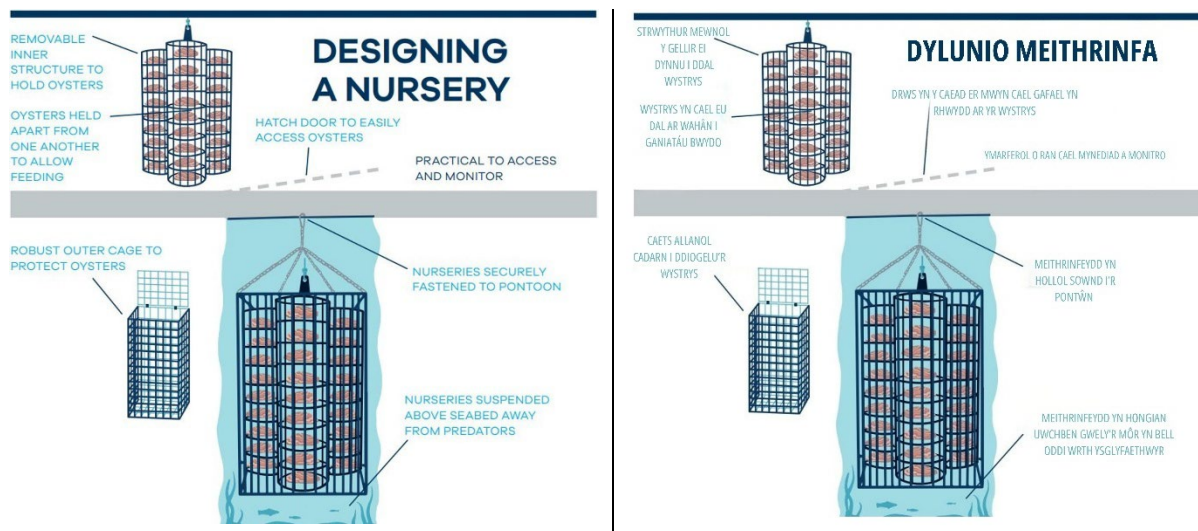


Figure 5. Schematic of the oyster nursery design, structure and installation under the marina pontoon (left) in English, (right) in Cymraeg, adapted from Helmer et al., 2021. © Blue Marine Foundation.

With support from volunteers, oyster health and the associated species in the nurseries were monitored monthly year-round and weekly in summer to assess oyster reproduction across marina sites (Table 2). For further information about the methodologies used, please refer to Section 2 in: [#NNF2 Restoring Wild Oysters to Conwy Bay: Technical report on oyster monitoring and habitat restoration](#).

Table 2. Summarising the oyster nursery monitoring data collected, used to assess the associated species communities, oyster mortality and reproduction.

Parameter	Sample Size	Method	Frequency
Mobile biodiversity	12 biodiversity nurseries monitored	1mm mesh net around nursery. The contents rinsed into 1mm mesh sieve, into tray for identification.	Monthly, all year
Sessile biodiversity	9 randomly selected oysters per biodiversity nursery	Rinsed, images taken of dorsal and ventral side. BIIGLE used for analysis.	Monthly, all year
Mortality	All oysters at all sites	Observational	Monthly
Larval monitoring	40 oysters submerged, at least 20 oysters opened and checked per restoration hub	Oysters submerged in 5% MgCl ₂	Weekly, May to September

This helped confirm the marinas as larval sources and informed wider restoration efforts in Conwy Bay. Monitoring also aimed to understand ecosystem services, such as improved water quality through oyster filtration and increased biodiversity through mobile fauna surveys. Oyster nursery monitoring results are outlined in Table 3.

*Table 3. Oyster nursery monitoring results during the NNF3 Connecting Conwy project funding period from August 2024 to May 2026. *Approximately 228 million larvae during the summer spawning seasons in 2024 and 2025. **Filtering rate is estimated based on filtering rate of 3l/h/oyster from Haure et al., 1998, accounting for oyster mortality and restocking figures.*

Category	Results
Oyster larvae released	228 million larvae (approx.) *
Annual oyster survival rate	83.4%
Number of litres of water filtered	73,396,800 litres (approx.) **
Unique species recorded within biodiversity sampling	39 different taxa recorded
Individual organisms recorded	6,303
Number of oysters housed in nurseries	1,700 on average

Monitoring of native oyster restoration trial site in Conwy Bay

Prior restoration activities

The Nature Networks (round 2)-funded *Restoring Wild Oysters to Conwy Bay* project successfully completed a small-scale research trial to assess the feasibility of oyster restoration in Conwy Bay, marking the first native oyster recovery initiative in North Wales. For further information, please see Figure 6 below and refer to Section 3 in: [*#NNF2 Restoring Wild Oysters to Conwy Bay: Technical report on oyster monitoring and habitat restoration.*](#)

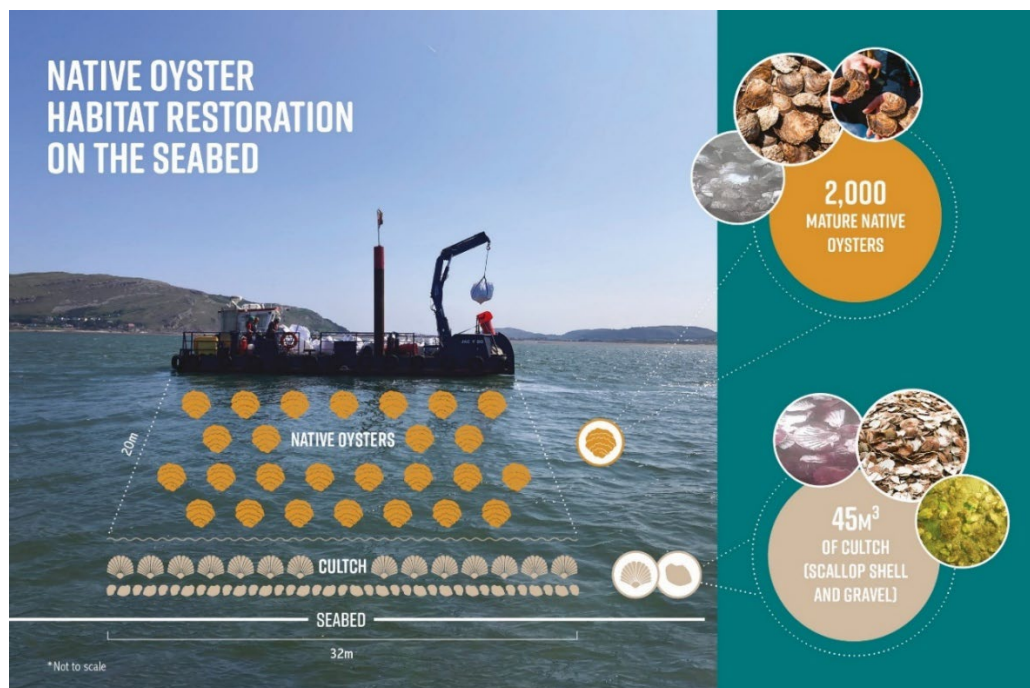


Figure 6. Infographic showing the native oyster habitat restoration activities carried out on the seabed, including the deployment of 45m³ of cultch (scallop shell and gravel) and 2,000 mature native oysters.

Monitoring methods and location

Data collection and monitoring is a key component of oyster restoration, helping to guide best practice and inform future actions. Monitoring has been undertaken throughout the project to support site selection and establish baseline values for key metrics (Table 4). Ecological monitoring is designed to detect environmental changes and evaluate the project's success in achieving restoration objectives through a Before-After-Control-Impact (BACI) approach. This involves conducting surveys at both the restoration and control sites before and after restoration activities (Figure 7). Prior to any seabed deployment, both sites supported similar fauna and broadscale habitats. The control site has remained undisturbed throughout the project and serves as a reference for comparison.

Three survey techniques were applied to assess the restoration site and the control site: 1) Multibeam echosounder, 2) Baited remote underwater video (BRUV), (3) Drop-down camera and Remote Underwater Vehicle (ROV) (Table 4).

Table 4. Summarising the seabed restoration monitoring plan. Data collected to assess the project footprint and reef height, infaunal invertebrates, mobile species, habitat and sessile species, shell cover, oyster density, oyster size and settlement.

Monitoring metric	Method	Frequency
Project footprint and reef height	Multibeam echosounder data	Pre & post deployment, annually
Mobile species	BRUV survey (3 in reef site, 3 in control site)	Pre & post reef deployment, annually
Habitat & sessile species, Shell cover, Oyster density, Oyster size	Drop down video & stills (100 stills per reef site and 100 per control site) ROV video & stills	Pre & post reef deployment, annually



Figure 7. Location of restoration site and control site within Conwy Bay. Basemap sources: Esri, DigitalGlobe, GeoEye, i-cubed, USDA FSA, USGS, AEX, Getmapping, Aerogrid, IGN, IGP, swisstopo, and the GIS User Community. © British Crown and OceanWise, 2023. All rights reserved. Licence No. EK001-20trained802. Not to be used for Navigation).

Bathymetry seabed survey results

A multibeam echosounder (MBES) was used to measure discrete depths capturing bathymetry data to assess project footprint and seabed height biannually. A MBES survey was completed in July 2025, following the deployment of cultch and oysters (Figure 8). In March 2026, a further MBES survey was undertaken and found difference to seabed height (Figure 9), which is expected following winter storms. Figure 9 indicates potential translocation of cultch and/or other seabed substrate.

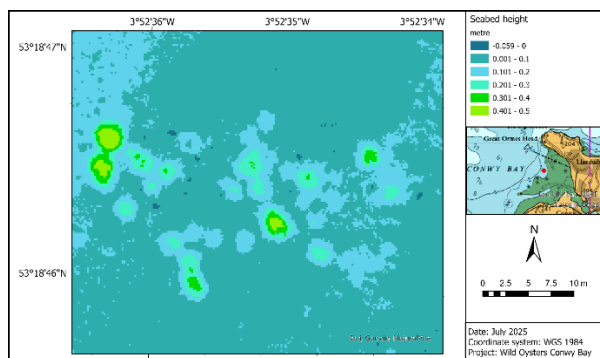


Figure 8. Bathymetry survey conducted in July 2025 to assess project footprint, seabed height following deployment of scallop shell cultch and oysters within a section of the reef site within license area.

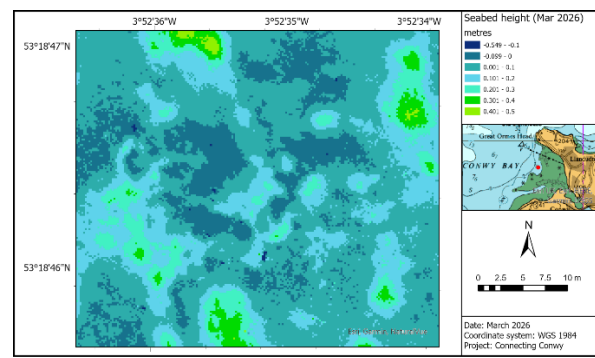


Figure 9. Bathymetry survey conducted in March 2026 to assess project footprint, seabed height following deployment of scallop shell cultch and oysters within a section of the reef site within license area.

Imagery analysis

Camera surveys were conducted annually collecting imagery to assess biodiversity: invasive non-native species, epifaunal sessile invertebrates and macrophytes, shell cover and oyster density.

Imagery from a post-reef survey in August 2025 was analysed by ENVISION Ltd. to identify the benthic habitats present in these areas by recording the substrate and epifauna present and providing quantitative and semi-quantitative data to support this. Imagery was also reviewed to record percent coverage of cultch shell cover (where imagery quality allowed) and for features of conservation interest.

The still imagery analysis recorded a total of five broadscale habitats at the reef site: (1) 'Subtidal Mixed Sediment', (2) 'Moderate Energy Infralittoral Rock', (3) 'Subtidal Sand', (4) 'Artificial Substrate', and (5) 'Subtidal Coarse Sediment'. The control site had a total of three broadscale habitats: (1) 'Moderate Energy Infralittoral Rock', (2) 'Subtidal Mixed Sediment' and (3) 'Subtidal Sand'.

Within the reef site, taxa included anemones (recorded as Actiniaria, Anthozoa, *Urticina*), worms (*Lanice conchilega*, Sabellidae, Terebellidae, *Tubulanus*, *Sabella pavonia*), fish (*Callionymus*, Actinopterygii, Gobiidae), starfish (*Asterias rubens*) and decapods (Paguridae, *Necora puber*). High numbers of predatory species such as crab and starfish can decimate shellfish populations, as reported locally in the blue mussel fisheries in Conwy and the Menai Strait. Additional parameters are being explored to assess predatory pressures at the restoration site. Within the control site, taxa included anemones (recorded as Anthozoa, Actiniaria, Sagartiidae, *Urticina*), gastropods (Gastropoda, Trochidae), worms (*Sabellaria spinulosa*, Terebellidae, Echiura, Phoronids), fish (Actinopterygii, Gobiidae), decapods (Caridea, *Necora puber*) and hydroids (Sertulariidae). Across both sites, encrusting taxa (Serpulidae), red macroalgae (Rhodophyta), brown macroalgae (Phaeophyceae), tunicates (*Clavelina lepadiformis*), foliose Bryozoa, encrusting sponge and massive sponges (Porifera) were also present.

For further information, see report: ENVISION report *Connecting Conwy Project – Post-reef Imagery Analysis (2025)*.

These survey results supported that the cultch material and oysters were successfully deployed within the restoration site in the summer and were still present in autumn 2025 (Figure 10). An ROV survey completed in spring 2026 confirmed the presence of significant amounts of cultch within the reef footprint (Figure 11). Translocation of cultch outside the original deployment site was observed but the material remained within the wider seabed licence area. Visibility was poor and analysis is ongoing to confirm the presence of oysters at the site. Alternative survey techniques using divers are being explored.



Figure 10. Still image from ROV video survey in October 2025 confirming the presence of cultch material and oysters (within red box) within the restoration site.

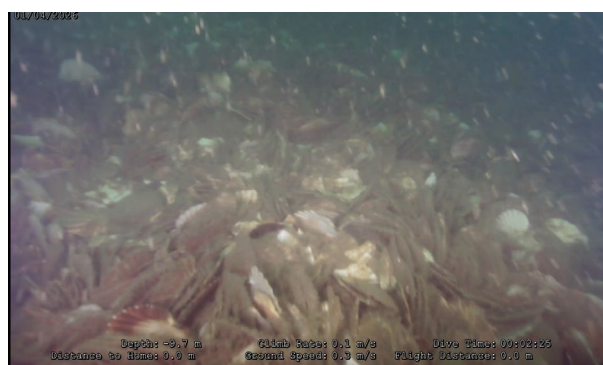


Figure 11. Still image from ROV video survey in April 2026 confirming the presence of cultch with the restoration site.

A BRUV survey was completed to assess the abundance of small resident fish and mobile invertebrates, transient fish and crustaceans on the restoration site and control site. Imagery was analysed from an initial BRUV survey completed in July 2023. A total of

14 species were recorded across six BRUV deployments, comprising seven crustacean, six fish, and one echinoderm species (Table 5). Relative abundance was quantified using the MaxN metric, with the mean total MaxN per deployment two-fold higher in the restoration site (30 ± 12.12) than the control (15.67 ± 3.21) (Figure 12; 13).

Table 5. Species recorded across all BRUV deployments at the restoration and control sites, taxonomic group, and site presence.

Species	Group	Presence in
Common goby (<i>Pomatoschistus microps</i>)	Fish	Both
Grey gurnard (<i>Eutrigla gurnardus</i>)	Fish	Control only
Nurse hound (<i>Scyliorhinus stellaris</i>)	Fish	Control only
Pouting (<i>Trisopterus luscus</i>)	Fish	Control only
Small spotted catshark (<i>Scyliorhinus canicula</i>)	Fish	Both
Whiting (<i>Merlangius merlangus</i>)	Fish	Both
Edible crab (<i>Cancer pagurus</i>)	Crustacean	Control only
Green crab (<i>Carcinus maenas</i>)	Crustacean	Both
Harbour swimming crab (<i>Liocarcinus depurator</i>)	Crustacean	Control only
Hermit crab (<i>Pagurus bernhardus</i>)	Crustacean	Restoration only
Shrimp (<i>Crangon crangon</i>)	Crustacean	Control only
Spiny spider crab (<i>Maja brachydactyla</i>)	Crustacean	Restoration only
Velvet swimming crab (<i>Necora puber</i>)	Crustacean	Both
Common starfish (<i>Asterias rubens</i>)	Echinoderm	Restoration only

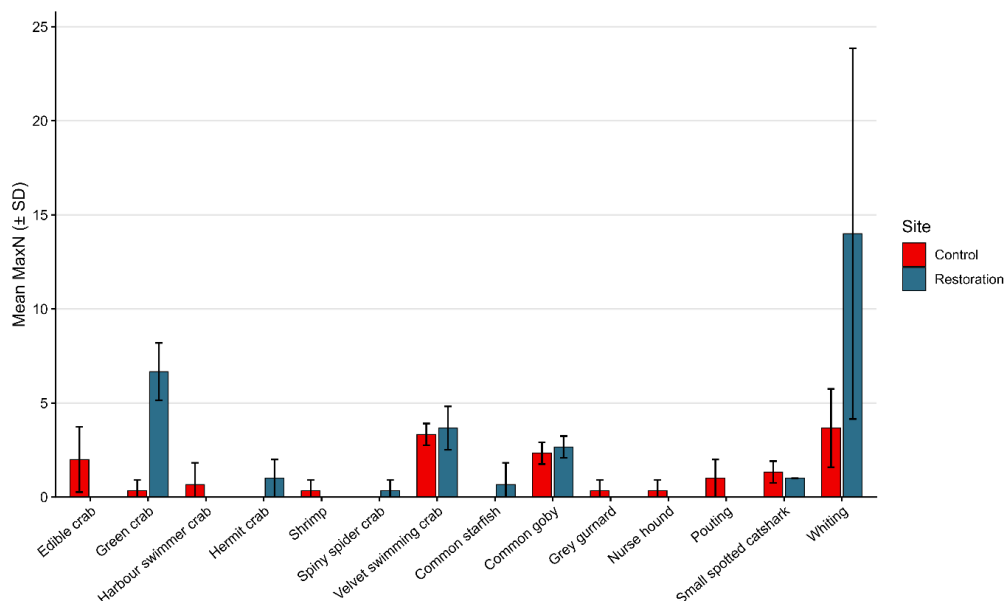


Figure 12. Mean MaxN ($\pm$ SD) per deployment for all species recorded across restoration and control sites during BRUV surveys. Error bars represent standard deviation. $n = 3$ deployments per site.

For further information, see report: Preliminary assessment of mobile biodiversity associated with native oyster restoration in Conwy Bay using Baited Remote Underwater Video (BRUV). Imagery analysis from consecutive years is ongoing.

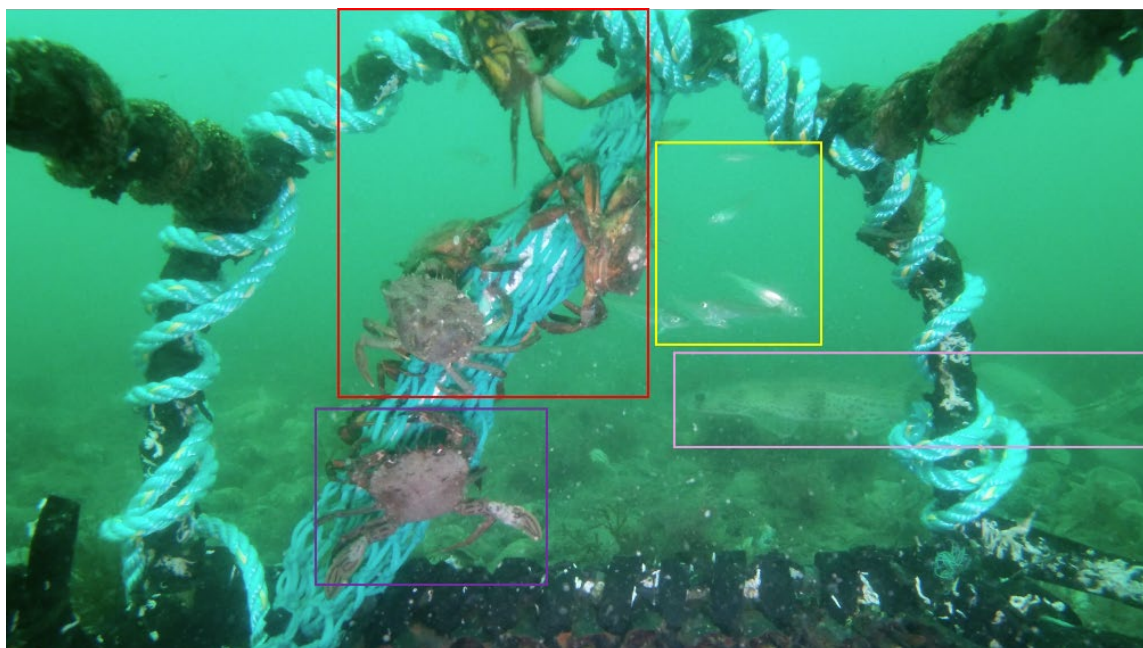


Figure 13. Still image from the BRUV survey footage in Conwy Bay with species present: Whiting, *Merlangius merlangus* (yellow box), Green crab, *Carcinus maenas* (red box), Small spotted catshark, *Scyliorhinus canicular* (pink box), Velvet swimming crab, *Necora puber* (purple box).

Oyster survival trial in the Menai Strait, deploying oysters at the Bangor University Research Raft in Menai Bridge

The project delivered a native oyster survivability trial between September 2025 and March 2026 to explore the feasibility of recovering *Ostrea edulis* to the Menai Strait. The trial compared oyster survival, shell growth and species settlement between an exposed site at a research raft owned by Bangor University in Menai Bridge (Figure 14) and a sheltered site at Conwy Marina.

Oyster survival averaged 70% at the raft and 98% at Conwy Marina, with initial elevated mortality rate at the exposed site linked to acclimation stress. After this period, survival remained high at both sites (98–100%). Shell growth was limited and highly variable, with no significant differences detected between sites



Figure 14. Native oyster survivability trial activities in the Menai Strait, including oyster ID tagging, deployment and monitoring at the Bangor University research raft © Rhianna Parry.

Environmental conditions differed between sites, with the raft showing more stable salinity and greater hydrodynamic exposure, while Conwy Marina experienced more variable salinity and chlorophyll-*a* concentrations. Percentage cover of species was higher at the raft site (74%), with more bivalve taxa recorded, than at marina (50%). No clear negative effect of species settlement was observed.

Additional investigations over a longer period are required to assess seasonality patterns and evaluation of the outcomes from the habitat suitability modelling and ground-truthing surveys will inform future oyster trials.

For further information, see report: [#NNF3 Connecting Conwy: Oyster Survival Trials in the Menai Strait SAC –Science Summary Report.](#)

Oyster disease testing

A pilot oyster disease study trialled a novel non-destructive disease detection method developed by the Roslin Institute (Regan *et al.*, 2025), using faeces and pseudofaeces sampling rather than destructive tissue sampling. The work aimed to explore disease prevalence within oysters in the Menai Strait and Conwy Bay SAC, designated as a *Bonamia ostreae* positive area (CD05/2015). *B. ostreae* is considered a barrier to native oyster recovery across Europe due to oyster mortality and movement restrictions.



Figure 15. Native oyster held within suspended nursery cages at Conwy Marina. © Rhianna Parry.

The pilot used the oysters held within suspended nursery systems at two project locations: Conwy Marina and the Menai Strait research raft, originally sourced from a certified disease-free fishery in Scotland (Figure 15). Samples were collected in March 2026, following the oyster survival trial. Oysters were cleaned and grouped into separate aerated containers containing artificial seawater and incubated overnight (Figure 16). The accumulated faeces and pseudofaeces was then collected (approx. 1ml) from each container (Figure 17). Samples were frozen at -20°C before being transported to ZSL for qPCR analysis.

The study provided valuable learning around implementing disease testing within oyster recovery settings, including the time requirements associated with sample preparation and laboratory processing. It also contributed towards building internal capacity within ZSL to support future disease monitoring across additional oyster restoration sites.

Although final analytical results were not available within this reporting period due to ongoing qPCR optimisation and validation, the study successfully trialled an emerging disease monitoring method. The pilot provided valuable learning around implementing disease testing within oyster recovery settings and helped build internal capacity within ZSL to support future shellfish health monitoring.



Figure 16. Native oysters undergoing biosecurity cleaning with volunteers and overnight incubation prior to non-destructive disease testing. (left, middle) © Hannah Adams; (right) ©Rhianna Parry.



Figure 17. Collection and preparation of faeces and pseudofaeces sediment samples prior to freezing and qPCR analysis. © Rhianna Parry.

Goal 2: Insights and lessons learnt

1. **Research partnerships** - Collaboration with Bangor University and use of the Menai Strait research raft provided valuable facilities for oyster survival trials, environmental monitoring and adaptive learning in exposed marine conditions. The partnership demonstrated the value of combining academic expertise with practical restoration delivery.
2. **Tagging methodology and materials** highlighted the importance of using durable marine-grade adhesives and attachment methods especially under exposed conditions.
3. **Oyster nurseries are an effective engagement tool** to involve the local community and schools in conservation activities. However, nursery maintenance, volunteer coordination and engagement required significant staff time and capacity, which should be better accounted for in future projects.
4. **Habitat restoration monitoring techniques** – future work should integrate additional methods, such as eDNA, to improve understanding of biodiversity benefits. Monitoring also highlighted the need to better understand predation pressures, while diver surveys proved valuable for locating oysters and assessing seabed conditions.



Figure 18. Volunteers monitoring native oyster nurseries at Conwy Marina, highlighting the role of oyster nurseries as an effective community engagement tool. © Rhianna Parry.

Goal 3: Engage and involve a wide range of people

Goal 3 focused on engaging people in understanding, valuing and contributing to marine habitat recovery across Conwy Bay and the Menai Strait. Through citizen science, education, internships and public engagement, the project aimed to strengthen ocean literacy, build local skills and support inclusive participation in marine recovery.

Volunteer citizen science opportunities

Volunteers contributed towards monthly monitoring of native oyster nurseries at Conwy and Deganwy Marina between August 2025 - May 2026, and data collection for the oyster survival trials. Table 6 reflects strong community enthusiasm for marine stewardship, with participants showing continued commitment to habitat recovery when provided opportunities to build skills and connections (Figure 19; 20).

Table 6. Volunteer participation and engagement summary.

Activity	Total
Monitoring sessions delivered	10
Oyster nursery monitoring	48 nurseries across two sites, housing 1,700+ oysters
Volunteer engagement	105 volunteers engaged, 36 new and 69 returning (66% retention)



Figure 1919. Group photo of volunteers participating in oyster nursery monitoring at Conwy Marina @ Mary Tetley (BSAC).

Volunteer updates were shared via WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, the volunteer email list (313 subscribers), and media teams. Informal celebration events, including the Christmas Monitoring Special, also helped share results and demonstrate how volunteer-collected data supported project goals.



Figure 2020. Volunteers monitoring oyster nurseries, checking oyster health and associated biodiversity at Conwy Marina. (left) © Rhianna Parry; (right) @ Mary Tetley.

Volunteer feedback demonstrated increased environmental awareness, skills development and community participation. Participants reported increased understanding of marine habitat recovery and strong feelings of inclusion and value within the group. Hands-on experiences helped strengthen connections to local coastal environments, marine heritage and environmental action. Several volunteers shared that the project “encouraged me to seek out other volunteering opportunities that support environmental projects in North Wales”, “opened many doors” and “ignited my passion for bivalves and our local habitat”.

Feedback also highlighted the project’s welcoming and inclusive atmosphere, including positive experiences from volunteers with mobility limitations and neurodivergent diagnoses. Demographic feedback indicated broader age representation than previous projects, with increased participation from volunteers aged 45–54 and 55+. Participants all recognised the importance of connected habitat recovery through a wider seascape-scale approach.

Invasive non-native species workshop

Partnering with Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales, the project delivered two Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS) workshops at the Bangor University School of Ocean Sciences to strengthen local capacity for marine habitat monitoring and restoration. The sessions aimed to improve species identification skills, increase biosecurity awareness, and support more accurate detection and reporting of marine INNS, contributing directly to wider project objectives focused on understanding habitat condition, extent and barriers to restoration.

Museum Wales brought specialist taxonomic expertise and preserved specimens to support hands-on learning. The first session combined presentations on marine INNS, ecological impacts and identification features with practical specimen identification exercises (Figure 21). Demand was exceptionally high, with the session fully booked within two hours of opening. A second drop-in workshop provided additional opportunities for participants to engage directly with the taxonomists, examine specimens and discuss monitoring challenges.

A total of 33 participants attended across both sessions, including citizen scientists, marine science students and researchers. Post-event feedback (n=18) demonstrated strong outcomes: 100% of respondents reported improved knowledge of marine invasive groups, 89% reported increased confidence in identifying INNS, and 100% reported improved understanding of lesser-known taxa such as sea squirts and bryozoans. Participants particularly valued the hands-on learning approach, with one attendee commenting: "Having a visual aid whilst learning about species helped me the most."



Figure 2121. Citizen scientists examining marine invasive species specimens during the INNS workshop with Amgueddfa Cymru © Rhianna Parry.

Internships

As part of the project's commitment to supporting local skills development and creating training opportunities within North Wales, four placement participants were facilitated. Two placements were delivered through the project's early career internship opportunities, alongside two additional placements facilitated by both ZSL and Bangor University's internship schemes (Figure 22).



Figure 2222. Early career researchers and interns supporting monitoring, engagement and oyster survival trial activities across Conwy Bay and the Menai Strait; (from left) © Rhianna Parry; (right) © Sasha Shute.

The placements provided participants with practical and transferable skills across marine recovery and monitoring. Activities included oyster monitoring, larvae analysis, disease sampling, BRUV footage analysis, report writing, and supporting volunteer engagement and workshops. Participants also gained experience in communication, facilitation and local actor engagement.

Participants highlighted the value of experiencing the diversity of work involved in marine restoration. One participant reflected: "The diversity of tasks, from fieldwork to lab work to report writing, gave me a really valuable insight into how restoration projects operate in practice." Another noted: "It was refreshing to focus on the social side of science ... learning how to facilitate meaningful conversations between different groups."

All four participants reported that the placements increased their interest in pursuing careers in marine science or related sectors. One participant commented: "This project has helped me figure out what I would like to do in my future."

Overall, participant feedback was positive, with placements providing meaningful hands-on experience and helping build practical skills, confidence and career aspirations within the marine conservation sector.

Bilingual education sessions to local schools and education providers

The education programme was designed to enhance ocean literacy and awareness of native oysters, associated habitats, and the ecosystem and societal services they provide among KS2 to higher education learners. The programme aimed to inspire the next generation of marine stewards to care for the marine environment through place-based and experiential learning.

As part of this delivery, five education sessions were held, reaching 164 students across KS2 and higher education. Of these, four sessions were delivered bilingually or in Welsh, supporting inclusive access to marine science education in North Wales. Delivery included:

- **Ysgol Cynfran**, Old Colwyn – two KS2 oyster and eel ecology classroom workshops (60 pupils)
- **Ysgol Penmachno**, Conwy Marina – marina visit through Source to Sea / O'r Tarddiad I'r Tonnau collaboration (33 pupils)
- **Ruthin/Conwy schools**, Ruthin – workshop delivery through Keep Wales Tidy's Revive Our Oceans programme, alongside North Wales Wildlife Trust (60 pupils)
- **Bangor University (Endeavour Society)**, Conwy Marina – higher education field site visit and monitoring session (11 students)

Sessions included a mix of bilingual classroom workshops, and hands-on activities. Topics covered included oyster ecology, seagrass, blue mussel and saltmarsh habitats, biodiversity interactions, and source-to-sea, helping learners understand how upstream processes influence downstream marine environments. Students also engaged directly with marine monitoring activities, observing oysters and associated biodiversity in situ.



Figure 23. KS2 students taking part in being a scientist for the day at an "Oyster Safari" session at Conwy Marina through the Source to Sea / O'r Tarddiad I'r Tonnau collaboration © Jess Balla.

Feedback highlights pupils' engagement and enthusiasm throughout the sessions:

"Seeing the young people excited by their surroundings in the marina was brilliant. Continued engagement with citizen science has a normalising effect and might allow young people to see themselves in these roles in the future." — Source to Sea / O'r Tarddiad i'r Tonnau

"It opened a lot of eyes to local marine ecosystems, the importance of conservation, and green career pathways. The workshop also inspired schools to continue activities back at school." — Keep Wales Tidy / Eco-Schools Wales

This delivery expanded the programme into new schools and geographic areas and strengthened understanding of marine recovery within a wider source-to-sea and seascape context and collaboration with other conservation projects.

Collaborate with local events to raise awareness of the local marine environment

Collaboration with local, regional and national events was central to raising awareness of the marine environment. Through co-delivered events and partner-led activities, the project shared habitat recovery messages across established community networks. The team contributed to 24 engagement events, reaching 1,132 people through talks, workshops, outreach stands, citizen science sessions and community celebration events.

Some examples of key events delivered include:

- **3rd North Wales Marine Conservation Conference**, Bangor University — Outreach stand, poster and talk contribution to a regional conference (80 attendees)
- **Wild Summit Conference**, Bristol — Invited by the Marine Conservation Society to contribute to a panel discussion on ocean literacy and community engagement (60 attendees)
- **Seagrass Ocean Rescue North Wales (x2 sessions)**, Pen Llŷn and Penrhos — Participation in community seagrass restoration and citizen science activities (25 attendees)
- **Menai Strait Partnership Forum (MSPF) meetings Menai Bridge** — Project talks, updates and regional knowledge exchange relating to water quality, habitat recovery and marine stewardship (70 attendees across meetings)

Collaborative workshops supported knowledge exchange and early-stage seascape recovery discussions:

- **Seagrass Network Cymru**: National Seagrass Action Plan (NSAP) workshop, Menai Bridge (15 attendees)

- **Environment Platform Wales:** Wales Blue Carbon Forum meeting, Menai Bridge (20 attendees)
- **Welsh Ocean Literacy Coalition** (Y Môr a Ni, CaSP Cymru): quarterly meetings and workshops, online (90 attendees across meetings).

The project also presented at a range of national and international events supporting knowledge exchange with marine recovery networks. These included the Restoring Meadows Marshes and Reefs (ReMeMaRe) Conference, Scarborough (150 attendees); Native Oyster Restoration Alliance Conference (NORA6), Spain (120 attendees); ZSL's Seascape Symposium, London (50 attendees); and Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) visit & Celtic Sea networking event, Conwy (30 attendees).

Community events created opportunities for local communities to engage in marine heritage, biodiversity and conservation activities. A key collaborative event was *The Sea We Share: Family Day / Y Môr a Rhanwn – Diwrnod i'r Teulu*, Rhos-on-Sea (100 attendees).



Figure 24. Outreach and family engagement activities at Rhos-on-Sea promenade, including interactive marine led stalls and VR scuba safari experiences © Rhianna Parry.

Delivered in partnership between #NNF3 Connecting Conwy and Bionet, the Local Nature Partnership for North East Wales, *The Sea We Share* was a free community event celebrating marine conservation, coastal heritage and communities. The event aimed to engage families and local communities through interactive activities, including VR scuba safari experiences, oyster and seaweed viewing tanks, shell identification activities, beach cleans, environmental art workshops, seabird outreach, and live sea shanty performances (Figure 24).



Figure 25. Young residents identifying species living within seaweed and kelp habitats during hands-on marine biodiversity activities, alongside event partners from Bangor University, Bionet LNP and Y Môr a Ni – Welsh Ocean Literacy Coalition © Rhianna Parry.

Goal 3: Insights and lessons learnt

1. **Collaboration with specialist partners** such as Amgueddfa Cymru improved access to expert-led INNS training, specialist knowledge and hands-on skills development opportunities.
2. **Delivering regular, hands-on monitoring sessions** alongside consistent volunteer communications helped build long-term participation, peer relationships and continued engagement in marine recovery activities.
3. **Combining undergraduate, internship and early-career opportunities** created broader entry points for participants to gain practical experience, develop skills and support future career opportunities.
4. **Delivering bilingual activities and communications** helped to improve accessibility and inclusivity and to strengthen engagement with local communities across North Wales. The support provided by CYMEN translation services was particularly valuable in enabling consistent bilingual communication and strengthening Welsh-language participation across project activities.

Conclusion

The #NNF3 Connecting Conwy project has laid foundations for a more connected, collaborative and evidence-led approach to marine habitat recovery across the Menai Strait and Conwy Bay SAC, improving understanding of opportunities and challenges associated with future seascape-scale restoration in North Wales.

#NNF3 Connecting Conwy broadened the focus from single habitat restoration towards a wider, multi-habitat seascape approach. The project brought together evidence relating to native oyster reefs, seagrass, saltmarsh and blue mussel habitats to better understand habitat connectivity, ecosystem resilience and long-term marine recovery planning.

The project delivered key scientific evidence to support future restoration planning, including desk-based habitat reviews, updated habitat suitability assessments, ground-truthing surveys, and ongoing oyster restoration monitoring. These outputs improved understanding of habitat distribution, environmental suitability, operational constraints and evidence gaps across the region. Monitoring of the Conwy Bay oyster restoration site, alongside the Menai Strait oyster survival trial, also generated insights into oyster survivability, habitat conditions and associated biodiversity. Community involvement and knowledge exchange were central to the project through workshops, local meetings, citizen science, volunteer monitoring, internships and education sessions.

Overall, #NNF3 Connecting Conwy has provided an important step towards future seascape recovery in North Wales, strengthening the scientific evidence base, regional collaboration and local engagement, to support healthier, resilient coastal ecosystems.

Legacy and future

ZSL and Bangor University have secured continuation funding to advance seascape restoration planning, strengthen partnerships, and develop a Seascape Restoration Plan.

The project secured £250,000 through the Nature Networks Fund Round 5 for #NNF5 Menai–Connecting Coasts: A seascape approach to restoring coastal habitats in the Menai Strait and Conwy Bay (2026–2028). The project will co-develop a five-year Seascape Restoration Plan with communities and local actors, alongside expanding citizen science, outreach and training opportunities. Ecological monitoring and restoration feasibility work using native oysters as a case study will also continue.

An additional £15,000 from the Rewilding Britain Innovation Fund will support a Native Oyster Restoration Feasibility Study (2026–2027), investigating where oyster recovery is ecologically suitable, socially supported and logistically feasible, directly informing the wider Seascape Restoration Plan.

Contact information

The Zoological Society of London

<https://www.zsl.org/what-we-do/projects/marine-habitat-restoration>

Zoological Society of London

Regent's Park, London, NW1 4RY

Registered Charity no. 208728

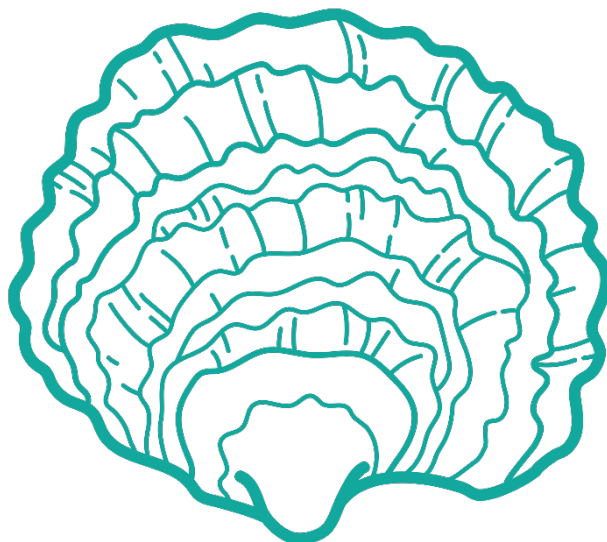
Bangor University

<https://www.bangor.ac.uk/the-wild-oysters-conwy-bay/nnf3-connecting-conwy>

School of Ocean Sciences,

Menai Bridge,

Anglesey, LL59 5AB



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