

Annual Report October 2002 - 2003

The Helford VMCA Group has developed significantly since its launch in 1987 but the central theme of 'Community, Commerce and Conservation' aimed at improving and protecting the sensitive marine wildlife of the Helford River is as relevant as ever. Quarterly meetings have continued to provide a well-used local forum attracting an average of 18 representatives from the many different river user sectors who exchange ideas and information and learn from invited specialists. Topics considered in the last year include the St Agnes No Take Zone aimed at improving shellfish catches, netting methods used for fishing, cetacean strandings involving over 210 in Cornwall alone, Helford water quality monitoring, the culture of shellfish other than oysters, issues on ports of refuge for stricken ships and various measures in hand to control pollution from spillage as diverse as oil and baby-nappies. Other relevant activities discussed have been the 2003 surveys of the birds of the Helford River and the snorkelling and diving programme of the Silver Dolphin Centre, Porthleven.

HVMCA members have again been involved with marine conservation issues on a wider front both locally and nationally through direct contact with the Cornwall County, District and Parish Councils, English Nature, Environment Agency, South West Water, WWF (UK), the National Trust, Duchy Oyster Farm, Helford Moorings Officer and other River users. Consideration has been given to an updated version of the HVMCA Strategic Guidelines and future Work programme to be published at the end of the year.

The Group has had an input into recently established bylaws aimed at regulating cockle collection on a large scale which mainly takes place in other estuaries. Local collection is by hand and, whilst smaller numbers are involved, the impact is not insignificant. The Group has also had an input into coastal fringe planning applications, concerns over Fal Bay maerl extraction or specific projects such as the Helford Fishermen's jetty.

The circulation of detailed reports of HVMCA meetings on request keeps some 55 recipients in contact although some are unable to attend meetings regularly. Numerous telephone enquiries range from oil pollution incidents to injured swans.

Financial support for this work has been forthcoming through substantial grants from the Esmeé Fairbairn Trust and Emergency Planning, Cornwall County Council, with welcome additional support from most of the Associate Members. The Environment Agency has kindly supported the events programme organisation. Sincere thanks are offered to all our supporters.

EVENTS 2003

During the last year an imaginative series of events has been offered to the local community. In November at the AGM Dr Tegwyn Harris fascinated a large audience with his lively account of the microscopical world of Helford mud and the micro flora and fauna at the bottom of the food-chain.



Aim: To safeguard the marine life of the Helford River by any appropriate means within its status as a Voluntary Marine Conservation Area, to increase the diversity of its intertidal community and raise awareness of its marine interest and importance.

For further information relating to the Helford Voluntary Marine Conservation Area please contact

the HVMCA Group Co-ordinator: PE Tompsett, Avelon, Colborne Avenue, Illogan, Redruth, TR16 4EB. Tel: 01209842316

Chairman: David Muirhead Co-ordinator: Pamela Tompsett

Design: Sheila McCann, Cornwall Wildlife Trust Illustration: Sarah McCartney, Cornwall Wildlife Trust

In contrast an early spring gathering enjoyed some exceptional films of Robin Kewell's marine conservation adventures in the far away Auckland islands and New Zealand fiordland.

Estuary protection booming was the subject of another well-attended meeting before the outdoor programme began on a beautiful early morning (7.00am!) with a Tremayne Wood bird walk attracting 11 people.

Despite a change to gales and heavy showers in May some 18 intrepid would-be botanists braved the elements on Rosemullion Head with Keith Spurgin and even begged Pamela to organise a longer botanical training session in 2004!! An added bonus to this walk was the pod of dolphins seen cavorting in the choppy waters below the cliffs.

Thankfully the weather was kinder for the start of a snorkelling safari at Durgan with David Ball.



The 30 swimmers ranged in age from 5 to 70 yrs and enjoyed clear underwater views until the light faded with the first rumblings of a thunderstorm at which point hot drinks were favoured onshore.

Beach Cleans and barbecues at Helford Passage and St Anthony combined useful activity with some social relaxation.

An intriguing combination of marine exploration and beach art was masterminded by Robin Paris and enjoyed by over 30 people.

The long spell of glorious sunshine attracted even more applicants than usual for the 14th Annual Conservation Cruise and we could have filled two boats. However our limit was 100 and off Dennis Head we enjoyed wide vistas with numerous white sails and sea birds such as fulmars and shags. In contrast the sunlit creeks with wooded shores sheltered numerous little egrets, herons and woodland birds. On board, the young and not-so-young could engage with crabs,

worms and shellfish amongst the seaweed in tanks and trays manned by enthusiastic National Trust volunteers. Commentaries on the marine life, local history, bird life, fishing, water quality, land-use and the aims of the Helford VMCA Group were much appreciated by all.

Back on dry land an Autumn Mammal Mosey gave a group of 19 the opportunity to enjoy the coastal path whilst looking for signs of our furry friends under the expert eye of Kate Stokes, of the Mammals and Rivers Project .

Local schools lost the special input that they had previously enjoyed through the Helford Education Ranger project for which no direct replacement could be found but we hope that the enthusiasm generated will be taken up by others on a wider front in the future.

Meanwhile we welcomed Ruth Williams back to lead four very successful shore events at Helford Passage, Treath and Prisk Cove with numbers averaging 28. We are very grateful for the enthusiasm of the leaders and volunteers who take part in all these activities.

In May a special event was staged to mark the retirement of the long-serving Chairman Leslie Collins who has done so much to shape the Helford VMCA Group. He was presented with a Helford River scene by a local artist. The occasion was further enhanced by the presence of another guest, Stella Turk, a founder member, who had recently been awarded the MBE. Amongst those enjoying the evening were some who, in the mid-1980s, had also taken part in the early survey work and the formation of the group such as Stephen Warman, Roger Covey, Leonard Robinson, Anthony Jenkin, Pam Lyne, William Rickard as well as the current co-ordinator Pamela Tompsett.

HELFDOR VMCA WEBSITE

With the help of Jayne Herbert, the website has been updated and extended to include the extracted newsletter, events and news and can be accessed at www.helfordmarineconservation.co.uk.

PROJECTS

Although the water temperatures have again been high, no extensive algal bloom has been recorded such as that which caused significant damage to the local fauna in late August 2002. Long-lasting effects of this bloom have not been identified precisely as observations within the Eelgrass beds have continued but in 2003 the range of species seen included Corkwing and Ballan wrasse, Pollack, Bass, Little and Common cuttlefish, Sandmason worms and many Hermit and Shore crabs. However the numbers of Peacock worms and Snakelocks anemones were reported to be much lower than usual and the shoals of gobies smaller.

The Helford eelgrass beds have now extended further upriver below Durgan but with no obvious increase in the overall density. The buoys advising against anchoring in the beds because of damage to the eelgrass rhizomes have deterred many boat-owners and warning cards were distributed on a large scale to Helford moorings owners (240+). Volunteer Tony Sutton has continued to dive there whenever the opportunity arose but sadly he has lost his regular diving companion with the recent and untimely death of Lance Peters.

Over the years information has been collected about the Triggling activities on the Helford cockle beds and it is hoped that this may be updated and published if time and resources allow.

As part of the Bass Project Derek Goodwin carried out a check on the over-wintered hatch from the previous year and this showed a staggering number of the 2002 hatch to be present . It was not possible to net the Helford for the current 'O' group but numbers

appeared promising in the Fal and a full report appears elsewhere. (Sadly Derek's wife suffered a serious accident in August 2003 and the HVMCA Group members send their best wishes to both Derek and Peg).

THE FUTURE

Following the conclusion of the full-time Ranger project the Group has concentrated on its networking function and public awareness programme through Pamela who is allocating more of her time again as Co-ordinator. The closely linked public membership body Helford Marine Conservation Society has been actively supportive taking a significant role in various events and promoting the marine conservation message widely.

Many individuals and organisations have generously contributed their time and expertise in a variety of ways for the benefit of the whole Helford VMCA - a real joint effort!

Pamela E Tompsett
Helford VMCA Group Co-ordinator

Helford Farm Project

Cornwall Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group are being funded through the Cycleau Project to deliver advice to farmers throughout the Helford catchment. Advice will focus on issues such as improving soil structure and using different cultivation techniques to minimise soil erosion. Nutrient management will also be advised upon, specifically quantifying the nutrients available to the farmer from manure / slurry and thus matching artificial fertiliser applications more accurately to crop requirements. I also intend to work closely with the bulb and vegetable growers who are renting land in the catchment. Farm visits will entail a walk around the farm with the farmer looking at in-

field operations and identifying possible erosion / runoff routes as well as identifying key wildlife habitats and species. A small grant will be available for works such as creating a new hedge as a physical barrier for eroding soil, or putting in new fencing to keep stock out of watercourses (for example). I will be working closely with the EA's monitoring team to establish exactly where there are problem areas, and consequently developing a better understanding of the links between changing land use and water quality.

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Counting Cornwall's Crustaceans

What a difference a month makes! Port Isaac harbour, bathed in the golden dawn light of an August morning, felt like a world away from the dark, wet and windy scene that greeted me there at 5.30 a.m. on a September Saturday. Even Blue, the fishermen's seagoing dog, looked less than enthusiastic, particularly when he realised that I had forgotten to bring him any biscuits. And this is only September - what will November be like? Mind you, some things don't change; the public conveniences are still shut at that time of the morning, no laughing matter when you have just driven up from Redruth!

So what gets a fishery officer to sea before 9 a.m. in such conditions? The opportunity to get my hands (and my measuring gauge) on crabs and lobsters, lots of them, probably at least 7000 in the last four months. Equally importantly, it's the opportunity to learn, at first hand, the realities of owning and working a potter and earning a living from crustaceans - or shellfish, as they are better known in Cornwall.

Shellfish, including brown crab (*Cancer pagurus*) and spider crabs (*Maia squinado*), lobsters (*Homarus gammarus*) and crayfish (*Palinurus vulgaris*), accounted for landings into Cornwall of over £4.5 million in 2002, supporting nearly 700 jobs on 400 boats working mainly within the Cornwall Sea Fisheries District out to 6 nautical miles. These are rough estimates, as they do not include landings of more specialised items such as green crabs and velvet swimming crabs, nor do they account for direct sales to pubs, restaurants and private buyers, which command a higher price than first hand sales to fish merchants. Whilst tonnes of shellfish, especially spider crabs, are exported to France and Spain, no Cornish café is without its crab sandwiches and the ever-burgeoning list of Cornish seafood restaurants all boast 'locally caught' lobsters on their menus.

Unlike cod, haddock and other white fish, there are no quotas for shellfish in the UK and many vessels have moved their efforts over to shellfish as quotas for other species have declined. In an attempt to cap this effort, a shellfish licence is currently being introduced throughout the UK, limiting the number of boats that can target these species. Locally, Cornwall Sea Fisheries Committee (CSFC) has run a permit scheme for many years, which monitored, but not restricted, shellfishing effort in our inshore waters. Whilst this scheme provided valuable estimates of the landings of shellfish at various ports, it told us nothing about the true nature of the stocks, as theoretically, only animals over the legal minimum sizes were landed.

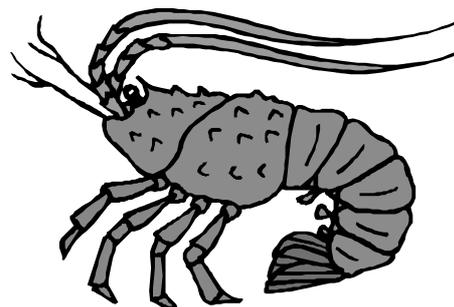
In an attempt to fill these gaps in our knowledge and to improve our management of these species, CSFC with

funding from Objective One and Cornwall County Council, has embarked on a 3-year survey of inshore shellfish stocks, using my monthly observations of potting activity on six boats based around the Cornish coast. On each trip, I select pots as they are hauled aboard and their contents are thrown into a bongo or basket. The assorted crabs writhe around, attempting to tear off one another's legs and claws, in addition to my fingers, whilst I try and measure the sizes of their carapaces (shells). As lobsters are more easily damaged and more valuable, I often find myself lurching across the deck with one in each hand, each intent on attacking the other as well as me. Records are also made of the sex of each animal, whether or not the females are berried (carrying eggs) and the stage of development of the eggs, the presence of damage or disease and if the animals are moulting or 'soft'. Notes are made of the weather, wind and sea conditions and temperature probes have been attached to a pot belonging to each vessel, to record the ambient water temperature.

As all the boats involved are relatively small, between 7.5 - 9 m in length, space is at a premium and obviously it is essential not to get in the way of fishing operations, particularly when the gear is being shot back into the water. The owner/skippers and crew involved have been really patient and helpful and happy to share their knowledge and understanding of the fishery and the ways in which it changes from month to month and from one area to another. Without this information, it would be too easy to draw conclusions from the data alone, without understanding the wider picture of what makes the fishery work.

At the end of 3 years, I will have amassed a huge amount of data and information, as well as a far better understanding of the nature of this valuable fishery and the people involved in it, hopefully before I have worn out my welcome. Fingers crossed for better weather next time!

Sam Davis
Senior Fisheries Officer, CSF



Bumper Seabass hatch in 2002

Although only two netting sessions were made this year very positive and useful results were obtained. The first was in June at the head of Polwheveral Creek where at a conservative estimate 2,500 bass of last years hatch were netted, detailed counts were not made to avoid casualties and ensure their safe return to the water. This was a phenomenal catch with more bass in that one haul than all the bass recorded in these reports since 1994 and it amazed the volunteer helpers! The net was simply full of small bass averaging 10.6 cm fork length with only 8 small mullet and 12 small gilthead bream as a bycatch. Not only was it a bumper catch, but the fish were strong and had made good growth over the Winter in spite of what must have been keen competition amongst them for food.

To confirm the strength of the year class another netting was made, not in the best Main Channel site as no boat was available but in Bonallack Creek, a very difficult muddy site. Bass are there when the conditions are right and sure enough 122 bass were netted; again the bass were of good size 10.9 cm average fork length and this was by far the best recorded catch there despite the unavoidable disturbance caused by wading in very muddy shallows and swimming to haul the net. One team member parted company with his thigh waders, and another one had such tired legs that he decided swimming in a few inches of water over the mud was the easiest option. Again all fish were returned unharmed. To avoid discouraging would-be volunteers it must be added that it is only in Bonallack Creek that such muddy netting is done, and an honest advance warning was (as always) given.

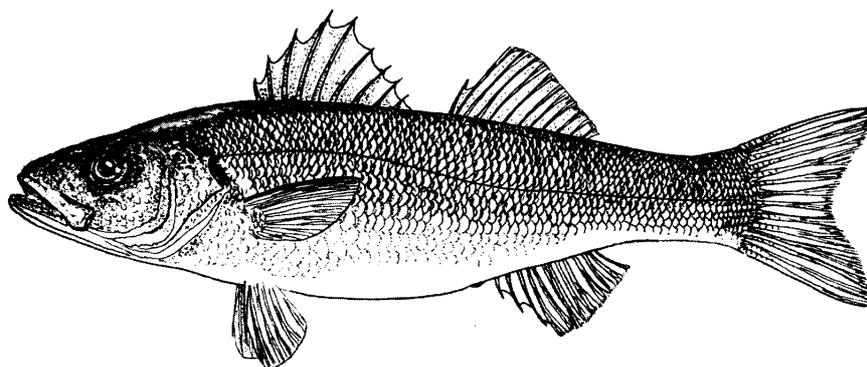
These results alone prove that 2002 is an outstandingly good year class for the Helford, hopefully providing

good fishing in 10 years time. These unusually large numbers were reported to Graham Pickett, a DEFRA fisheries scientist at the CEFAS Laboratory in Lowestoft. He was interested as the catch was not an isolated incident, and he is gathering evidence of what could be a massive year class in 2002. Amongst other reports, in the Tamar record numbers of this class were caught in two visits, and in the Thames 34,000 were recorded, where the previous best was 3,000. Climate warming is apparently having an impact on the production of bass. His view (as yet unproven) is that many bass are, as in the distant past, spawning inshore over a longer period. Many of these fish may be first time spawners that matured late and missed the offshore spawning run.

The good results in the Helford allowed me more time to be spent in the Fal searching for suitable sites for the 2002 class bass. A good catch in one site at Lamorran gave confirmation that 2002 was also a good year in the Fal. Netting continued in the Fal for this years bass "O" group, and a good catch was made in one site and a promising catch in another in July. The weather and tide was set fair to resume netting Polwheveral for this years bass on August 4th, but sadly this had to be abandoned. Hopefully it can be netted next year with perhaps another bumper catch of one year old bass.

The help given by John and David Ellis, Paul Bennetts, Peter Woodward, and Neil Hatton for the loan of his boat at Polwheveral is gratefully acknowledged. Special thanks were given to the National Seal Sanctuary for their support and allowing free access with our transport through their premises.

Derek C Goodwin
Bass Project Volunteer Team Leader



CUP CORALS AND CUCKOO WRASSE

Divers around Cornwall are not just busy blowing bubbles anymore, but actively helping to provide the vital information needed to help conserve our marine environment for the future.



Over the past few months almost 100 recreational divers have attended Seasearch training courses around the county. The simple one day course shows them how to identify certain marine habitats and species, and how to tell us what they see whilst they explore beneath the waves.

Surveys are quick and easy to complete and it is hoped divers will report back from every dive they do. Site details and an accurate position is taken on the dive entry site. The diver is then free to 'explore' the area surrounding that central point, or do a drift dive along a transect to his exit point. Observations are taken of seabed type (eg: rocky reef, boulders, sand or gravel) and what marine life is growing on it. Marine life is noted as both broad cover type (eg: kelp forest, short or long animal turf, or animal beds) and a separate species list with abundance estimates (common, occasional or rare).

Trained divers are now carrying out these observational surveys of the underwater world to help fill in the gaps in our knowledge of what marine life is found where around our coast. Only then can we really start to protect this important environment from the many and varied threats it faces.

Some of the Seasearch surveys carried out so far have given some great results. Beautiful Scarlet and gold star-corals (*Balanophyllia regia*) were found off St. Agnes, kelp forests full of Cuckoo wrasse (*Labrus*

bimaculatus = mixtus) and rock faces covered with brightly coloured Jewel anemones (*Corynactis viridis*) off Penzance. Crevices off Bude were home to Spiny spider crabs (*Maja squinado*) and Lobsters (*Homarus gammarus*) and the wonderfully named Potato crisp bryozoan (*Pentapora fascialis*) and Spiny starfish (*Marthasterias glacialis*) covered the reefs off Falmouth. On one dive off Durgan which everyone had dived many times before and what at first seemed like a muddy bottomed dive site covered in silt, turned out to be literally crawling with life when we started looking. Hermit crabs (*Pagurus bernhardus*), tube worms (including the Peacock worm *Sabella pavonina* and *Myxicola infundibulum*), burrowing anemones (*Cerianthus lloydii*) and even the occasional Cuttlefish (*Sepia officinalis*) camouflaged against the sand were all recorded. The wealth of life around our coasts is amazing when you start to look and that's what Seasearch divers are doing.

All records from dives are being entered into both local and national databases and the information gathered is already being used to help monitor areas such as St. Agnes No Take Zone, and identify biodiversity hotspots. Hopefully the surveys will start to flood in and contribute to this important work and future conservation projects. We will be running more Seasearch courses and dives in the future and want to encourage as many divers out there to become involved. Any dive can be a Seasearch dive!

If you'd like to get involved please get in touch on 01872 245520.

Ruth Williams
Marine Conservation Officer



SAC Monitoring

A report critical of the data available to effectively monitor the health of the Fal and Helford cSAC has recently been prepared by the Plymouth Science Partnership* for English Nature and the Environment Agency.

This desk-study report - Characterisation of European Marine Sites - makes clear that addressing the various problems found in the SAC will not be easy because of "glaring shortcomings" in basic data, which has also hampered its studies. The report has noted some changes within the SAC, but often it has not been able to say what has caused the problems.

The authors say there has been a "decline in many species which has continued unchecked and in some instances resulted in their almost complete elimination from the system."

The study notes:

- A dramatic fall in the numbers of dogwhelks, limpets and topshells. Dogwhelks, have now all but been eliminated from the Fal and Helford cSAC by TBT. Populations of European sting winkle, *Ocenebra erinacea*, are also at risk.

- Evidence of a long-term decrease in proportion of live maerl (calcified seaweed). The flora and fauna of the maerl bed are also lower in abundance than might be expected by comparison with other such beds in Ireland, Scotland and France.

- Lower diversity of species associated with marine eelgrass beds compared with other eelgrass communities in other areas, such as the Isles of Scilly.

- Impoverishment of Fal nursery grounds for bass compared with other estuaries.

- Evidence for the effects of pollutants (metals, organotins, microbial toxins) to organisms at all levels of the food chain, e.g. meiofauna to mute swans.

- Destruction of many of the eelgrass beds (reason unknown) and silting over of adjacent areas of gravel and clutter.

- Reductions in numbers of the peacock worm, *Sabella penicillus* (=pavonina), edible cockle and mussel.

- Dramatic decline in oyster numbers since 1982 (due to *Bonamia ostreae*).

English Nature and the Environment Agency were due to discuss the report's findings last month (August 2003).

(* UK Marine Biological Association, Plymouth Marine Laboratory, Plymouth University)
Extracted for this newsletter by Tony Sutton

Increased cetacean bycatch and rising sea temperate; a possible link

Once more one can see the large number of cetacean strandings in the winter months compared with those of the summer. The total to date is 210, - another unwelcome record - made up as follow:-

January - 79

February - 33

March - 57

April - 21

May - 7

June - 3

July - 3

Aug - 5

September - 1 - up to time of writing 20 September 2003

Will there be fewer bycatch numbers this coming winter? We know from observations in our own waters by fishermen as well as those routinely found in the

monitoring of Common Dolphins on the bay of Biscay, that exceptionally large numbers moved north this year. Indeed none were left in the Bay. Such movements may have been triggered by the migrations of fish responding to warming waters. An account in *The Independent* August 2003, describes how a summer fishery is being affected by temperature. It reads "French and Spanish fishermen have scoured the Bay of Biscay in vain for the usual shoals of anchovies and tuna this summer. Their favourite catch has been sheltering from the hot weather hundreds of miles away to the north, off the coasts of Ireland and Scotland". South of Brittany the sea has been 5° warmer than usual. It remains to be seen whether such migrations are becoming a settled a pattern with temperature affecting the range of many fish species.

Stella M Turk

Fish parasite responds to climate change!

Fishermen will often have noticed parasites dangling, with their trail of eggs, in the eyes or gills of their catches. These are copepods, a group to which the well-known Cyclops belongs but it is only in the past few years that we could expect one of the isopods or 'sea-slaters' on a fish. One such species was found a few years ago on the Lesser Weever at Whitsand Bay (east Cornwall), Whitsand Bay (west Cornwall) and Perranporth. An account by specialist Tammy Horton appeared in the Journal of the Marine Biological Association in 2000. Earlier this year whilst collecting sand eels at Hayle, Treve Opie found two specimens blocking the mouth of a Lesser Weever - some species actually replace the tongue of the fish. Additionally he found them crawling over the bodies of the sand eels, having not yet settled down to an easy life of

parasitism. Until these records *Ceratothoa strandachneri*, was found only on fish in the more southerly parts of their range.

From the Isles of Scilly Martin Goodey and Ren Hathway have sent digital pictures and specimens of slaters discovered on two other fish species - a Garfish and a mackerel. They were sent to Tammy Horton who has identified them as two different species, both known in the N. E. Atlantic but both seemingly to be new to the Cornish coast. So do please collect any specimens - or isopods (and indeed copepods) send them to the Environmental Records Centre for Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, Allet, Truro TR4 9DJ.

Stella M Turk

A tribute to Lance Peters - one of our long-standing HVMCA Group members who sadly lost his fight against cancer in July.

Lance loved his scrumpy cider. It went well with his 6ft 4in gangly frame and grey beard. His eyes would light up and a smile would spread across his face as he sat down on Thursday evenings to his favourite drink in the Ferry Boat Inn - just a minute's walk from his home which he shared with his father on the Helford River.

A small group of us used to meet regularly on those nights. What bound us together was our passion for the sea and underwater photography, apart from the beer or cider of course!

Often Lance would have been out for the day on his boat, the Blue Minstrel, with an angling party. He would take them to fish-populated wrecks up to 30 miles offshore and it never ceased to amaze him how seals found the wrecks too. They would be there when he arrived: floating on the surface, resting up before taking the plunge for their next meal. They were out of sight of land. Lance had his GPS to get to the wreck. How did the seals do it? What's more the seals were able to keep "on station" above the wreck in spite of tides.

Nature held an endless fascination for Lance. He used to note unusual or exciting occurrences, a mako shark leaping clear of the water just a mile offshore on the Manacles for instance. Although he made his living from fishing he used to try and persuade fishing parties to leave sharks alone.

He was as keen on protecting cetaceans. My last boat trip with Lance on the Blue Minstrel - just six weeks before he died - was with Nick Tregenza who is developing a cetacean friendly alerting device so that the dolphins and

porpoises don't become ensnared in nets. The Truly Alerting Device (TAD) as Nick calls it was being moved from one location off Coverack to another off the Manacles. Nick offered to pay for the use of Lance's boat, but Lance as usual politely but firmly refused.

That was his other characteristic: a very generous spirit. He was quite happy to run an underwater photography course for Falmouth College of Art students and look after their equipment without any payment.

He attended the first meeting of the Helford VMCA group and freely contributed to the group's knowledge with his observations on the river and in particular the surveying and monitoring of the eelgrass beds.

Lance had been a biology teacher in the Gloucester area before he moved back to Cornwall in the eighties to help look after his mother. Weekends in Gloucester were spent not diving but gliding. In the Ferry Boat he used to talk about hopping from thermal to thermal hour after hour across southern England in pursuit of long distance records and frightening air pilots who never expected to come across gliders at the altitude they were travelling at. Last winter we both had a diving holiday in the Red Sea and my abiding memory of him on that trip is not underwater but being catapulted into the night sky above Sharm El Sheik and seeing his bungee-tied seat and six foot plus frame madly spinning 200 feet above the ground. That was fun and he went back for more.

Tony Sutton

Editor: The Helford VMCA Group will miss his valued presence greatly. Condolences have been sent to Lance's father on behalf of the members.