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Broad-scale biotope mapping of potential reefs in the Irish Sea (north-west of Anglesey)

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5. Areas of conservation interest

The two study areas that contained the most Annex I reef were Areas 2 and 4. Area 2 included patches of boulder reef that were associated with the drumlins. These complied with the definition of reef according to the EU Habitats Directive (CEC 2007) in that they were comprised of cobbles and boulders, were topographically distinct from the surrounding area, and supported a typical reef fauna, comprised of hydroids, soft corals and bryozoans. Due to the limited biological sampling, reef habitat was only recorded on a relatively small number of occasions. However the association with the drumlins means that it can be assumed that many of the other drumlins that were not sampled would also support reef habitat. The area of drumlins obviously extended beyond the survey area, hence patchy boulder reef habitat would be greater than the 44km^2 surveyed. Unfortunately no other data exists that can indicate exactly how far beyond the survey area drumlins and associated reef may be present.

Within Area 4, the reef was again primarily boulder and cobble reef, although in one place bedrock was observed. The multibeam data indicated that bedrock does outcrop in this area, so it could be that additional sampling would reveal a mixed bedrock and boulder reef. Despite the different seabed features with which the reef was associated, the reef fauna was very similar to that found in Area 2. Again the data indicated that areas of reef could extend beyond the survey area. Some of the reef areas were associated with a rock outcrop, the extent of which was modelled within UKSeaMap, covering an area of 29km^2 (Connor *et al.,* 2006). Therefore it is likely that further instances of reef would be found beyond the extent of the study area, if additional sampling were undertaken.

All stony reef habitat observed appeared to be typical of boulder communities subjected to strong tidal currents, such as the mixed cobble reefs found within Pen Llyn a'r Sarnau, Cardigan Bay and Pembrokeshire Marine SACs. In order to determine whether these areas would be progressed towards designation within an SAC, further work is required, to compare the communities observed to those within other existing SACs and Areas of Search for SACs (areas where Annex I habitats are thought to be present, and that could be designated as SACs in future). In addition, consideration would need to be given as to whether further survey work would be required in order to determine the full extent of the reef areas.