

THAMES HARBOUR PORPOISES: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE UK'S SMALLEST CETACEAN IN OUR BUSIEST URBAN WATERWAY

The presence and distribution of harbour porpoises (and other marine mammals) in the Thames Estuary and adjacent waters; a research and outreach project.

In the 1950s, the Thames Estuary was declared biologically dead due to excessive pollution; in contrast, it is now a thriving and diverse ecosystem for many species including 120 species of fish, harbour seals and grey seals. From public sightings, there is evidence that the UK's smallest cetacean, the harbour porpoise is also present; however no systematic survey for harbour porpoises has been conducted and despite great interest in whales and dolphins in the UK, there is very little public awareness of this species within the Thames Estuary. The species suffers throughout its range from anthropogenic pressures such as fisheries bycatch, man-made noise and pollution from marine litter and chemicals, and knowledge of their distribution and improved awareness of the presence of harbour porpoises living within or visiting the tidal Thames, as well as the threats they face, is needed to help drive future conservation for this species.



A map showing the River Thames and Thames Estuary, the red box shows the survey area.

Marine Conservation Research International (MCR) and the Zoological Society of London (ZSL), in coordination with local interest groups, including the Wildlife Trusts, plan to conduct the first dedicated acoustic and visual surveys for harbour porpoises in the Greater Thames Estuary during winter 2014 and summer 2015.



Harbour porpoises (National Geographic © Bill Curtsinger)

The aim is to understand the species presence and distribution as well as the levels of marine litter, man-made noise and fishing activities. The results will provide new and exciting insights into the presence of the species in the tidal Thames, as well as help to determine trends in North Sea porpoise distribution. This will inform future conservation activities and ensure that harbour porpoises are appropriately considered in future developments.

Throughout the project, a range of innovative outreach and educational activities will be conducted to inspire and re-connect children and adults with their local environment; we will raise awareness of the fact that marine mammals live in the Thames Estuary and stimulate people's interest in the Thames Estuary and marine science, with the aim of encouraging better environmental stewardship. Virtual classrooms, an intern/participants scheme during the survey, open days, a stand at the Thames River Festival and lectures to A-level students will all be included. The results of the survey will be publicised widely through scientific papers, local and regional media attention and on the ZSL Thames Marine Mammal Sightings Survey website.