



Site Name: Belgica Mound Province SAC

Site Code: 002327

In the north-east Atlantic, major sedimentary mound areas exist that are several million years old. These carbonate mounds form isolated or clustered seabed elevations that may measure up to 350 m high and, in Ireland, significant clusters have been documented fringing the upper slopes of the Rockall Trough and Porcupine Seabight. Almost all host coral reef patches. The Belgica Mound Province is located on the eastern edge of the Porcupine Seabight, approximately 100 km south-west of the Co. Kerry coastline.

The site is a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) selected for the following habitats and/or species listed on Annex I / II of the E.U. Habitats Directive (* = priority; numbers in brackets are Natura 2000 codes):

[1170] Reefs

In the Belgica Mound Province, extensive research has identified more than 60 carbonate mounds at depths of between 550 and 1,060 m, broadly distributed in two ranges running north-east/ south-west. The majority have an elongated shape, are aligned in a north-south direction and average 166 m high. A number of mounds in the southern part of the Province are buried.

The area selected for designation is the central part of the Province where coral-forming reefs are widespread. The site is, at its maximum, approximately 29 km long and 13 km wide, and covers an area of 411 km². The western-most mounds, close to the edge of the continental slope where water currents are strongest, support the best examples of coral reefs. This western range includes the Thérèse Mound, "Friends" and the Galway Mound, where the living coral is more extensive on the steep western slopes of the mounds. Smaller coral patch reefs are found on the Moira Mounds and may represent the start of mound formation.

In this area, *Madrepora oculata* and *Lophelia pertusa* are the main reef-forming coral species. A spectacular array of epibionts, including hydroid, bryozoan and glass sponge (*Aphrocallistes* sp.) species are found attached to coral colonies. Gorgonian coral (*Acanthogorgia* sp.), octocoral (*Anthotela grandiflora*), eunicid polychaetes, crustaceans (*Bathynectes* sp. and *Pandalus* sp.), stylasterid colonies (*Pliobrothus* sp.) sometimes with attached gastropods (*Pedicularia* sp.), unattached gastropods (*Clio* sp. and *Diacria* sp.), sea urchins (*Cidaris* sp.) and bivalves (*Clamis sulcata* and *Delectopecten vitreus*) have also been recorded.