

Site Name: West Connacht Coast SAC

Site Code: 002998

This site consists of a substantial area of marine waters lying off the coasts of Counties Mayo and Galway in the west of Ireland. Comprising two parts, in its northern component the site extends from the coastal waters off Erris Head westwards beyond Eagle Island and the Mullet Peninsula in Co. Mayo. From there it extends southwards immediately off the coast as far as the entrance to Blacksod Bay. In its southern component, the site stretches from Clare Island and the outer reaches of Clew Bay at Old Head and continues southwards off the Mayo coast to the Connemara coast near Clifden and Ballyconneely, Co Galway. Predominantly coastal in nature, the site extends westwards into Atlantic continental shelf waters up to approximately 7-11 km from the mainland, although in its southern component it remains mostly inshore of the main islands: Clare Island, Inishturk, Inishbofin and Inishshark. Its area contains subtidal waters fringing these and other islands, as well as islets and rocky skerries off the Co. Mayo and Co. Galway coasts.

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):

[1349] Bottle-nosed Dolphin (<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>)

The site encompasses a diverse range of shallow marine habitats occurring in waters less than 100 m deep. These include a variety of seabed structures including reefs, islets and sedimentary basins. The site contains physical and hydrographic features believed to be important for Bottle-nosed Dolphin, one of two cetacean species listed on Annex II of the E.U. Habitats Directive. These features include shallow coastal bays, areas of steep seafloor topography and complex areas of strong current flow adjacent to estuaries, coastal headlands and islands, sandbanks, shoals and reefs. Its area borders existing designated sites for protected species and habitats, and lies adjacent to a wide array of coastal features including sheltered bays, estuaries, coastal cliffs and sea caves, several of which are located within protected sites.

Bottle-nosed Dolphin occurs within the site in all seasons and the area comprises a key habitat for the species both regionally and within Irish waters as a whole. Survey data show that Bottle-nosed Dolphin occurrence within the site compares favourably with another designated site in Ireland, the Lower River Shannon. Local population estimates off south-west Co. Mayo and Connemara, Co. Galway describe a minimum of 123 dolphins, with possibly up to 150-200 individuals or more, occurring within the site as a whole, exceeding estimates for the Shannon Estuary population. Significant structural linkages have been established between groups of dolphins

utilising various coastal habitats within the site, while a high proportion of individuals within this Bottle-nosed Dolphin community have been shown to range freely within its coastal waters. Analyses of genetic structure also show a fine scale distinction between dolphins sampled within the site and animals sampled at the Shannon Estuary or nationally.

Sighting records of Bottle-nosed Dolphins via coastal and boat-based observations from the Mullet Peninsula and outlying islands, outer Clew Bay, Clare Island, Roonagh, outer Killary Harbour, Ballynakill Harbour and west Connemara are significant for the west coast of Ireland and indicate widespread use of the area by individual groups of dolphins. Groups are known to alter their composition or to aggregate together within the site and comparatively high group sizes of up to 50-65 individual dolphins or more have been recorded in the site's northern and southern components. Adults closely accompanying calves are commonly observed in summer and autumn months at a number of locations within the site, and group foraging, resting or social behaviour are also regularly recorded. Individual dolphins are also known to recur within and between years at key locations within the site (e.g., outer Killary Harbour, off the Mullet Peninsula), indicating a degree of site fidelity to its coastal waters.

The waters of the West Connacht Coast represent an exceptional area of key conservation importance for Bottle-nosed Dolphin in Ireland.