

19 August 2025

MARINE RESEARCH HELPS SECURE STATUS FOR FAIR ISLE FLAPPER SKATE HABITATS

- **Fair Isle has been recognised as an Important Shark and Ray Area (ISRAs) for flapper skate following research carried out on behalf of island's community**
- **Recognition highlights significance of Fair Isle's coastal habitats for the Flapper skate species and wider biodiversity of the marine ecosystem**
- **Research studies funded by players of People's Postcode Lottery through the National Trust for Scotland's Love Our Nature project**

The coastal region around Fair Isle has been awarded *Important Shark and Ray Areas* (ISRAs) status following marine research surveys supported by the National Trust for Scotland.

Findings from the research highlighted an abundance of the flapper skate species around the coast of Fair Isle following the third annual Fair Isle inshore fish survey carried out in 2024. The data collected was used to secure the ISRAs recognition for the Fair Isle community as part of its Fair Isle Demonstration and Research Marine Protected Area (DR MPA), the first ever community led project of its kind in the country.

The research, conducted by UHI Shetland in collaboration with the DR MPA, Fair Isle Marine Research Organisation (FIMRO) and the Trust, was carried out to better understand Fair Isle's natural heritage by observing and measuring the health of its marine environment. Researchers were able to build upon previous years' research by deploying new equipment and technology, made possible thanks to funding raised by players of People's Postcode Lottery.

Dr Shaun Fraser, Senior Scientist and Fisheries Lead at UHI Shetland, said: "Our research has helped secure international recognition of the important Shark and Ray Areas (ISRAs) status for the Fair Isle community and its DR MPA. Flapper skate, known locally as barn door skate, have been observed in higher abundances in recent years by local fishermen. The survey data collected by UHI Shetland around Fair Isle has provided data to back-up this trend and revealed evidence of an abundance hotspot in the Fair Isle area.

"It is important to clarify that there's no implication that this new status should lead to any restriction on fishing or other marine activities in the area. Nonetheless, this identification highlights the value of the data collected and provides further evidence of the importance of our nearshore areas as vital habitats for threatened and valuable marine species. This recognition will help to put these areas into an international

context and underscores the need for further research on important nearshore habitats that support the wider ecosystem.”

Funding supported researchers to develop a new way of monitoring life under the waves, by using a Baited Remote Underwater Video (BRUV), that recorded footage from the ocean floor. It was used alongside a scientific trawl net method to monitor the number and abundance of different marine species around Fair Isle as part of the third annual inshore fish survey.

Technology introduced by UHI Shetland based on an Orkney Skate Trust design, allowed the BRUV to land on the seabed and give a dorsal view of habitats and species, helping to identify a host of different sea-dwellers, particularly individual flapper skate by their distinctive dorsal spots. Alongside the seabed lander, a modified BRUV was used to drift halfway beneath the surface and the seabed to assess the species swimming through the ocean.

The survey findings were measured alongside other projects carried out by the researchers including seabed (benthic) habitat modelling. Data from the research projects is being used to build a holistic view of the health of the marine environment around Fair Isle, that has been in the care of the Trust for over 70 years.

Katie Cubbon, Fair Isle DR MPA Research Officer at NatureScot, who is co-ordinating the research projects supported by the National Trust for Scotland on behalf of the Fair Isle DR MPA partnership and FIMRO, said: “We carried out the third consecutive Fair Isle inshore fish survey last year and used a novel approach by deploying the newly designed BRUV lander equipment. By adopting this new technology, we were able to expand the scope of our work to monitor the health of the marine environment and identify trends and patterns when compared to previous years’ research.

“The 2024 footage recorded was dominated by flapper skate, that, when combined with our trawl net survey coverage, highlighted the abundance of the species and the potential of Fair Isle’s marine environment as an area of importance for elasmobranchs. Securing ISRA recognition for flapper skate reinforces that sentiment and will help enhance our research in the area going forward.

“It is thanks to the continued generosity of the National Trust for Scotland’s members and supporters, including players of People’s Postcode Lottery, that we’re able to continue this work to care for and protect Scotland’s natural heritage. This valuable contribution is vital to support our research to ensure the longevity and sustainability of these marine environments and safeguard their island communities for the future.”

Players of People’s Postcode Lottery have supported the conservation charity’s Love Our Nature project since 2022 which benefited from £900k last year. Further funding will support nature conservation work across a variety of different habitats including coastal and marine areas, peatlands, wetlands, woodland, and the eight National Nature Reserves cared for by the Trust.

Head of Charities at [People's Postcode Lottery](https://www.postcodelottery.co.uk/), Laura Chow, said: "Our players will be excited to see how this technology is helping to advance ocean research methods and enhance our knowledge and understanding of life beneath the seas around Fair Isle. It's rewarding to know that our players are supporting the local community to carry out the research and enhance the important nature conservation work of the places in the Trust's care."

The Love Our Nature project supports the National Trust for Scotland's vision to care for, protect and share Scotland's nature, beauty and heritage for everyone, as outlined in its 10-year strategy, launched in 2022. For more information on the National Trust for Scotland, visit www.nts.org.uk.

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Notes to Editors:

Images: <https://www.flickr.com/gp/133918740@N04/88mWW4S06H>

People's Postcode Lottery - <https://www.postcodelottery.co.uk/>

- Players of People's Postcode Lottery have now raised over £4m since 2014 to support the National Trust for Scotland. The funds are awarded through Postcode Earth Trust.

Shark and Ray Areas - <https://sharkrayareas.org>

- The identification of Important Shark and Ray Areas (ISRAs) is an evidence-driven process aimed to increase the knowledge of threatened shark and ray species.
- ISRAs are defined through the application of scientifically based criteria designed to consider important aspects of shark and ray biology and ecology.
- The ISRA process operates across 13 global regions with the European Atlantic area due to be launched later this month.
- Researchers at UHI Shetland led the submission of a proposal for flapper skate in the Fair Isle area for ISRAs, awarded by the ISRA program.
- The Fair Isle ISRA covers nearshore areas ranging from 0-90m deep encompassing a variety of different habitat types.
- The ISRA program is being executed by an international team of scientists, conservationists, policymakers, and marine protected areas practitioners committed to advancing our knowledge on habitats that are critical for conserving sharks, rays, and chimaeras.

National Trust for Scotland

Established in 1931, the National Trust for Scotland is Scotland's largest conservation charity and cares for, shares and speaks up for Scotland's magnificent heritage.

Over the last 90 years the Trust has pioneered public access to and shared ownership of some of the most magnificent buildings, collections and landscapes in Scotland. It cares for more than 100 sites, from ancient houses to battlefields, castles, mills, gardens, coastlines, islands, mountain ranges and the plants and animals which depend upon them.

In March 2022 the National Trust for Scotland launched *Nature, Beauty & Heritage for Everyone*, its ten-year strategy which sets out the ambitions of the charity over the coming decade. From speaking up for Scotland's heritage which doesn't have a voice, to improving the lives and wellbeing of people across the country, and responding to the climate and biodiversity crisis, the Trust will build on its work in recent years to grow its impact and conserve and restore more of Scotland's heritage, as it moves towards its centenary in 2031.

For more information on the National Trust for Scotland visit www.nts.org.uk. The National Trust for Scotland is a charity registered in Scotland, Charity Number SC 007410.