

Book Review

Exploring Britain's Hidden World

by Keith Hiscock

by Peter Rowlands

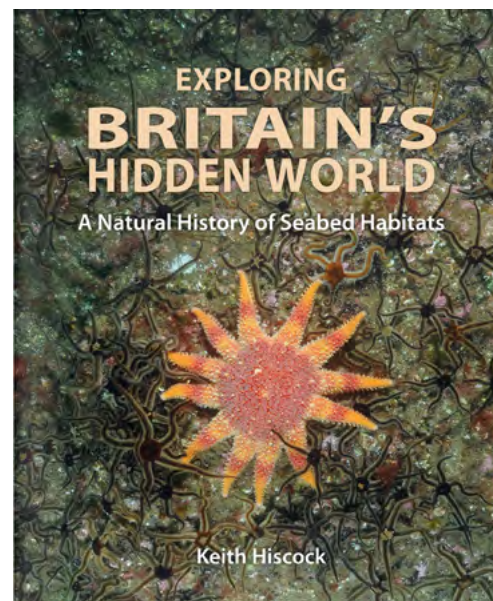
Every now and then someone comes along who can bridge a communication gap; capable of excelling within the academic, scientific world yet able to explain it to the majority of us, the laypeople, in terms that we don't find highbrow and intimidating yet still imparting information at an intelligent, embracing level. Such a person is Keith Hiscock, the author of *Exploring Britain's Hidden World - A Natural History of Seabed Habitats*.

There can be no doubt that the 20th century saw developments and discoveries on a scale hitherto unprecedented; the combustion engine, air travel and space exploration being the headline acts but it has been underwater, as always invisible to the public's eye, which has revealed a world of intricate complexity with seemingly boundless potential yet without it there would be a certain collapse of the natural world as

we know it.

At the turn of the century our knowledge base was achieved with crude mechanical grabs taking samples from fathoms below but by the end of it we had instruments to record and quantify every aspect combined with AUVs to take them to places and for durations way beyond our human limitations.

And yet, despite such huge technical, scientific advances, it was actually our new found ability to be able to go, and stay, underwater ourselves for useful amounts of time that brought about our 'understanding' of how it all fitted together because we could see it with our own eyes in real time; the juxtaposition and the intricate jigsaw of habitats which support a profusion of life on a par with any tropical rain forest or jungle.

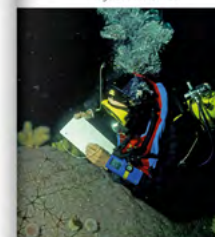


and, over the next 11 years, a programme of surveys, both by the team and through external contractors, identified what was where around our coasts, how to classify what we recorded, and how that information could be used to support marine conservation. Much of what I know about what is where on the shallow seabed around Britain comes from fieldwork as a part of the MNCR. The rationale and methods were published in 1996 and a volume summarising our knowledge of seabed (benthic) marine ecosystems in 1998. After fieldwork finished in 1998, team members went on to produce a series of *Regional Summaries*.

Answering an enquiry I made in 2004 about how many locations the MNCR had included in its surveys, the figures of 111 surveys, including around 3,000 associated locations and 8,800 sample stations, was determined. Although the MNCR 'finished'

The Marine Nature Conservation Review incorporated surveys from Muckle Flugga, the furthest north island in Britain, to Bishop Rock in the Isles of Scilly in the far south-west. Image of Muckle Flugga: David Connor/MNCR.

Describing the abundance of species at a survey station in 1988 during the MNCR survey of Shetland. The blue box is an early diving computer - the Orca Edge. Image: Sue Scott/MNCR.



MNCR surveys also described sediment communities and, especially where sediments were localised amongst rocks, used a suction sampler. Here, a suction sampler is in use at Craigleith in west Scotland. Image: Sue Scott/MNCR.



in 1998, it was never complete. Much survey work remains to be done, as there are gaps in knowledge that predictive algorithms cannot fill. Most importantly, all of the information collected through the MNCR was held in a database that could be interrogated and used to support environmental protection and management.



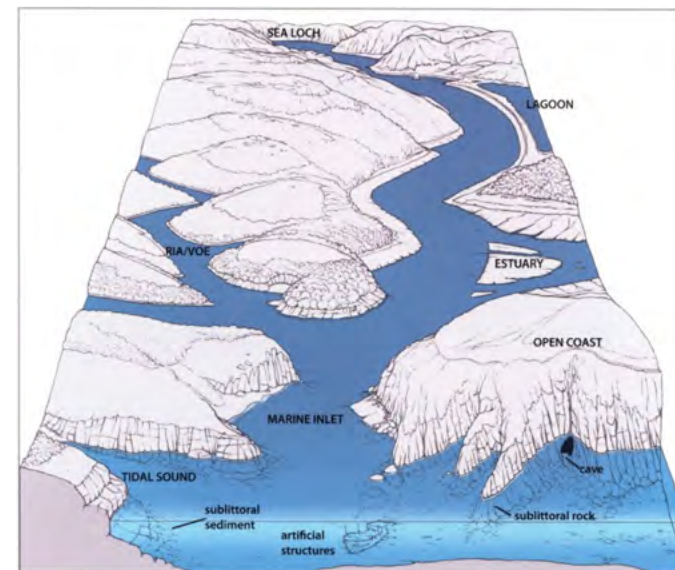


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Coastal physiographic and habitat features likely to hold distinctive communities of species. Based on a diagram in the AMCR Rationale and Methods

By fortuitous coincidence, the last 50 years of scientific discoveries have been in Keith's working lifetime as an ecologist and conservation scientist and both he, and now us, have benefited. The results from this most productive of times are condensed into this book for all to absorb.

Exploring Britain's Hidden World is like a perfectly presented personal scrapbook produced from a life at the coalface, so to speak. This is not a stuffy scientific delivery but a celebration of what could be portrayed as bland but in Keith's hands it comes alive with its infinite variety, the text is a well weighted fusion of down to earth and science and the images are consistently good at showing what is needed without fancy lighting and photographic

trickery. Both are equally complimentary.

To my mind the most important indication of an author's credibility is how they deal with today's environment and the future. The past and today's are known and to a certain extent we are sure that, if the present situation is allowed to continue, then, taken to the ultimate, there will almost certainly be no sustainable future. Keith's assessment of the current situation is a non inflammatory presentation of the facts and, like all good educators, he offers a vision of the future which is an achievable combination of personal involvement based on understanding aided by technical innovation to almost certainly redress

and restore the balance.

In conclusion I can only steal part of Callum Roberts' Foreword when he says "This is the book which I wish I'd possessed when I was starting out".

Exploring Britain's Hidden World - A Natural History of Seabed Habitats is published by Wild Nature Press and costs £25.

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