



Site Name: Kerry Head Shoal SAC

Site Code: 002263

Kerry Head Shoal, Co. Kerry is situated on the west coast of Ireland, to the north of Tralee Bay and to the west of Kerry Head. It is a deep (20-46 m) limestone reef running in a north-east to south-west direction. The reef is exposed to the full force of swells from the Atlantic.

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

The Kerry Head Shoal is of high importance as it is the best known example of the Axinellid sponge community in Ireland. Several species occur in associations that are unique in Ireland. The site contains a rich and diverse flora and fauna that is characterized by rare erect and encrusting sponges *Tetilla cranium*, *Quasillina brevis*, *Axinella flustra* and *Hexadella racovitzae*. These species are only known from one other locality in Ireland, while *T. zetlandica* has only been found in two other localities on the west coast.

The shallow water reef communities of Kerry Head Shoal are extremely exposed to wave action and subject to weak tidal streams. Sparse kelp (*Laminaria hyperborea*) on bedrock with occasional ridges and overhangs at 21-26 m overlies an understorey of foliose red algae (*Callophyllis laciniata*, *Kallymenia reniformis*, *Acrosorium venulosum*, *Cryptopleura ramosa* and *Delesseria sanguinea*). The red alga *Drachiella spectabilis* is abundant and the brown alga *Carpomitra costata* is common. Both of these species are characteristic of clear Atlantic water. The fauna is characterised by a diverse assemblage of sponges including *Pachymatisma johnstonia*, *Cliona celata* and *Polymastia boletiformis*. Other species that are present include hydroids (*Aglaophenia pluma* and *Nemertesia antennina*), sea-fans (*Eunicella verrucosa*), sea-slugs (*Aplysia punctata*), bryozoa (*Membranipora membranacea* and *Electra pilosa*), and echinoderms (*Holothuria forskali*). Four species that generally occur in deeper water - the hydroid *Gymnangium montagui*, the sea-fan *Eunicella verrucosa*, the sea-squirt *Diazona violacea* and the sponge *Axinella dissimilis* - are present in the kelp community

In deeper water, at 33-46 m, the bedrock ranges from large and relatively flat terraces cut by gullies, to ridged bedrock and angular boulders. Here the reefs are colonised by excellent examples of the Axinellid cup sponge community with an extremely high number of sponge species (44 species) and few algal species. The sponges *Axinella infundibuliformis*, *Phakellia ventilabrum* and *P. vermiculata* are frequent in this

community, as are a number of rare species including two sponges *Hexadella racovitzai* and *Axinella flustra*, the bryozoan rose 'coral' *Pentapora foliacea*, the sea-squirt *Diazona violacea* and the red soft coral *Alcyonium glomeratum*. In the deepest examples of this community the rare sponges *Tetilla zetlandica*, *T. cranium*, and *Quasillina brevis* are also present. The rare species of sea-slug *Aldisa zetlandica* has also been recorded from the deep reefs.

The reefs of the Kerry Head Shoal support a remarkable diversity of fauna and flora, including the best known example of the Axinellid sponge community in Ireland. The presence of a number of very rare sponge species (*Tetilla cranium*, *Axinella flustra*, *Hexadella racovitzai*, *T. zetlandica* and *Quasillina brevis*), known from only one or two other locations in Ireland, is of particular note.