

Case Study

The Living Coast Undersea Experience

Background

The Beachy Head West Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ) is an intertidal & near-shore zone, situated between Brighton Marina & Beachy Head. It contains some of the UK's best examples of chalk reef habitat, with specialised communities of animals & seaweeds, including the rare short-snouted seahorse.

The MCZ sits across the boundary of the South Downs National Park (SDNP), incorporating the West Sussex Heritage Coast and part of the Seven Sisters Voluntary Marine Conservation Area. It forms part of Brighton & Lewes Downs Biosphere Region, named 'The Living Coast' (TLC), which is also a UNESCO World Biosphere Region.

<https://thelivingcoast.org.uk/>

In a highly populated & visited area, the MCZ offers excellent opportunities for people to engage with marine nature.

However, public awareness of the MCZ status and its unique marine environment is low, due to its inaccessibility and low profile – a web search yields little media coverage. Public access is primarily along concrete under-cliff pathways and whilst diving is possible, costs are restrictive and waters cloudy for much of the year.

The Living Coast Biosphere partnered with Sussex Inshore Fisheries & Conservation Authority (IFCA) & Sussex Wildlife Trust to develop a pilot 'undersea experience' for educational purposes.

<https://thelivingcoast.org.uk/explore/tlc-undersea-experience>



The project

The Living Coast Undersea Experience is an interactive, 360 degree, Virtual Reality educational experience enabling people to access and understand the MCZ marine environment. Users follow their curiosity to explore the environment, discovering habitats, sea creatures and underwater archaeology. Users will develop a powerful, kinaesthetic understanding of the impact of tides and human behaviours, plus learn about the actions everyone can take to conserve and enhance the area's natural beauty, wildlife & heritage.

Users enter the experience as if preparing for a dive. On the 'seabed' they can:

- Walk around, explore & interact with the environment
- Learn about conservation issues, such as plastic in the water

With support from local artist Simon Wilkinson and KP Projects CIC the Undersea Experience was created using:

- Existing seabed mapping
- High quality imagery and film of specific marine life
- Digital and print educational materials and activities
- Cutting edge Virtual Reality technology enabling mobility. Users are able to explore a 4m² area interactively.
- Scenery and events alter in response to the user moving or interacting with the Undersea Experience's marine life or architecture.

The South Downs Trust 'Sustainable Communities Fund' was pleased to support this project with an initial £7,000 grant towards equipment to pilot the community education and outreach aspect of the project with a further £2,000 towards developing the schools programme.

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“Wow! We go rock-pooling here all the time and it was marvellous to experience it in a new and exciting way.”

“Amazing, had not realised that there was so much diversity in the local sea.”

“What a joy to see the coast in this way – a beautiful experience.”

Participant feedback

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The outcome

The Experience toured across The Living Coast into local schools, community centres, visitor centres, arts & other venues as part of a short pilot in spring-early summer 2019. Venues included Seven Sisters Visitors Centre, the National Marine Aquarium and at Artpod, a shop/studio in Rottingdean.

Piloting the experience allows for lessons to be learned regarding ticket cost, timings, user numbers, as well as the logistics of travelling to and hosting within widely varying venues and event spaces.

The experience runs at 5 minutes long so each headset can cater for 11 to 12 users per hour. The pilot successfully reached a wide audience over a relatively short period of time:

- 18 venues over 28 days for 117 hours
- 2,455 participants
- 84% ticket sales demonstrated the high demand.
- Ticket prices were £5 for four people or £1 each although the team mostly presented free of charge during the pilot period.

The future

The success of the pilot has paved the way for further tours and engagement, which are being planned for 2021/22.

The Living Coast Undersea Experience is now fundraising for a fully scaled regional tour.

You can read the full evaluation of the pilot, make a donation or book an event at:

<http://www.kp-projects.co.uk/the-living-coast-undersea-experience/>

For more information on the Sustainable Communities Fund, please visit:

www.southdownstrust.org.uk/scf/



The South Downs National Park Partnership Management Plan (PMP) 2020–25

The Partnership Management Plan 2020-2025 brings together and coordinates the aspirations of many different partners who help contribute towards the purposes for which it was designated.

This project successfully achieved the following PMP outcomes:

Outcome 6: There is widespread understanding of the special qualities of the National Park and the benefits it provides.

<https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/partnership-management-plan/>

July 2021