

Welcome to the Southwest Marine Fest Conference 2026

Welcome to the South West Marine Fest Conference, a friendly and engaging event that brings together people who are passionate about the marine environment and ocean conservation.

At Conservation Chat UK Ltd, we believe marine conservation events should be inclusive, welcoming, and full of community spirit — never formal or intimidating. This conference has been designed as a relaxed space where people from all walks of life can come together to share research, stories, ideas, and inspiration, whether you are a seasoned professional, student, enthusiast, or simply someone who cares about the future of our oceans.

This year's event has brought together a fantastic range of speakers, experts, organisations, and ocean advocates who are passionate about marine conservation and the natural world. We hope you enjoy the conference, make new connections, and leave feeling inspired to continue supporting and protecting our marine environment.

www.conservationchatuk.com

About Conservation Chat UK Ltd

Stu and Laura, the directors of Conservation Chat UK Ltd, are passionate about the natural world and have extensive experience working with animals, conservation, and environmental education. Conservation Chat UK Ltd was created to provide an engaging platform for communicating conservation, science, and environmental issues in an accessible and inclusive way.

We host a range of conferences, workshops, webinars, and educational events, with conservation at the heart of everything we do. We aim to connect people through a shared passion for wildlife, nature, and the protection of the planet.

You can explore our full range of events on Eventbrite



Housekeeping

<p>Fire Safety</p>	<p>No fire alarm drills are planned during the conference. Please ensure you pay close attention to the safety briefing at the start of the event and take a moment to familiarise yourself with the nearest exits.</p> <p>In the unlikely event of a fire alarm, please leave the building calmly and promptly using the nearest available exit, following any instructions from staff.</p>
<p>Wi-fi</p>	<p>See details on the main screen.</p>
<p>Refreshments</p>	<p>This is a ‘bring your own’ lunch event, and we encourage you to help us keep the day as low-impact as possible by going single-use plastic free.</p> <p>A selection of light refreshments will be available. In line with our commitment to reducing environmental impact, these options are vegetarian or plant-based, with gluten-free options available on request – please speak to a member of our team.</p> <p>There is an onsite café, and a range of local eateries nearby if you would prefer to leave the venue for lunch.</p>
<p>Questions</p>	<p>We welcome questions at the end of each talk. Please keep questions brief so that speakers are able to answer as many as possible.</p> <p>We encourage a range of viewpoints and discussion, but ask that all questions are respectful towards our speakers and their work.</p>
<p>Timekeeping</p>	<p>Speakers: We kindly ask all speakers to keep to their allocated time slots to ensure the programme runs smoothly and on schedule.</p> <p>Guests: To help the event run smoothly, please return to your seats promptly when you hear the dinner bell.</p>
<p>Social media</p>	<p>The event hashtag is #swmf26 and we welcome you to share your experience and conference content on social media.</p> <p>If you appear in any official content shared by Conservation Chat UK Ltd and would like it removed in line with our privacy policy, please contact us at conservationchat@outlook.com with clear details of the content in question.</p>
<p>Networking</p>	<p>We warmly welcome networking throughout the conference. Whatever your background or level of experience, we encourage you to connect with others, share knowledge, and take part in conversations about how we can work together to protect and preserve the marine environment.</p>
<p>Event feedback</p>	<p>We welcome your feedback and value your thoughts on the event. Please share your comments via our online feedback form.</p>

Agenda & Talk Summaries

Day One - Thursday 28th May 2026

9:30 - 10:00	Arrival and registration
10:00 - 10:10	House Keeping and welcome - Stuart & Laura Collier - Directors Conservation Chat UK Ltd
10:10 - 10:35	<p>Marine Conservation, A Year In Review – Laura Collier -Conservation Chat UK Ltd</p> <p>This talk reviews the major developments in marine conservation from May 2025 to May 2026—the good, the bad, and the unmistakably urgent. It highlights the year’s most encouraging progress, from advances in habitat restoration to expansions of protected areas and promising policy shifts. It then explores the challenges that defined the period, including continued pressure on fisheries and climate-driven disruptions across key ecosystems. Finally, it confronts the most concerning trends: accelerating biodiversity declines, extreme marine heatwaves, and setbacks in regulatory protections. Together, these insights offer a clear picture of how the ocean has changed over the past year and what actions are most crucial as we look ahead.</p>
10:35 - 11:00	<p>Blue Meadows: behind the scenes in conservation engagement - Megan Ross - Ocean Conservation Trust</p> <p>This talk will provide a brief introduction to seagrass and its vital role in healthy marine ecosystems, setting the context for the Blue Meadows project led by the Ocean Conservation Trust. Following this overview, the focus will shift to what goes into effective advocacy and community engagement for seagrass protection and restoration. Drawing on real-world experience from Blue Meadows, the talk will explore how outreach, education, and collaboration with local communities and stakeholders help turn awareness into action. The session will highlight the challenges and opportunities of engaging diverse audiences and demonstrate how community-led advocacy plays a key role in supporting long-term seagrass recovery.</p>
11:00 - 11:25	<p>Chlorophyll fluorescence assessment of Zostera marina health - Mia Carlidge - Ocean Conservation Trust</p> <p>Seagrass meadows have historically been the neglected heroes of our oceans, providing critical habitat for marine life, protecting coastlines and sequestering carbon. Marine heatwaves (MHWs) are periods of time, from days to months, where ocean temperatures become abnormally high, which causes marine organisms such as seagrass, to be pushed beyond its comfortable physiological limits. This study aims to investigate how heat-induced stress caused by fluctuating ocean temperatures such as marine heatwaves, impacts the health of the sub-tidal seagrass, <i>Z. marina</i>. This will be measured and analysed in an ex-situ environment, using chlorophyll fluorescence measurements of Fv/FM and ΦPSII values. This study would allow us to understand better the tolerance and barriers of temperature change that this seagrass can experience, before its photosynthetic ability becomes depleted, and whether the damage is a chronic impact or short-term functional responses.</p>
11:25 - 11:55	Refreshments break and networking opportunity.

Agenda & Talk Summaries

<p>11:55 - 12:20</p>	<p>The Sussex Dolphin Project - Thea Taylor - Sussex Dolphin Project</p> <p>Thea Taylor is a dedicated marine biologist and the Managing Director of the Sussex Dolphin Project. With a background in marine biology, Thea has built her career on understanding and protecting local cetacean populations. Her field experience spans from the Moray Firth in Scotland, where she worked as a research assistant and wildlife guide, to global projects studying cetacean distributions and population dynamics. Passionate about ecosystem restoration and community involvement, Thea champions citizen science initiatives that empower local people to help safeguard Sussex's marine mammals and coastal habitats for future generations.</p>
<p>12:20 - 12:45</p>	<p>Introducing the Devon Marine Strandings Network - Coral Smith - Devon Wildlife Trust</p> <p>Join Coral for a fascinating introduction to the Devon Marine Strandings Network (MSN), part of Devon Wildlife Trust. This talk will cover:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An introduction to Devon Wildlife Trust and the Marine Strandings Network • A summary and analysis of Devon's 2025 strandings data • Notable strandings from the year and key post-mortem findings • The incredible volunteer network that makes this vital work possible • Discover how strandings data helps us understand the health of Devon's marine environment — and how dedicated local volunteers play a crucial role in marine conservation.
<p>12:45 - 12:55</p>	<p>Speed networking</p>
<p>12:55 - 13:55</p>	<p>Lunch and networking</p>
<p>13:55 - 14:20</p>	<p>Cryopreservation as a Tool for Global Marine Conservation- Debbie Rolmanis - Nature's Safe</p> <p>An exploration of Nature's SAFE, preserving living cells to safeguard at-risk species and secure the future of global wildlife through advanced science.</p>
<p>14:20 - 14:25</p>	<p>Day Two - What to expect.</p>
<p>14:25 - 14:50</p>	<p>The Impact of International Educational Exchanges- Laura Field and Harry Clarke - Lantern Research Group</p> <p>Following a two-week knowledge exchange programme in Kerala, India, The Lantern Research Group, a collective of early-career marine researchers, reflect on how international collaboration can benefit marine conservation. The team delivered workshops, lectures, and hands-on training in data collection and analysis to an interdisciplinary audience of students, researchers, and local stakeholders. This talk shares their early findings and explores how partnerships between the international scientific community and local communities can support more effective, integrated approaches to protecting the ocean.</p>
<p>14:50 - 15:15</p>	<p>Refreshments break and networking opportunity.</p>
<p>15:15 - 15:45</p>	<p>Delegate activity - Career Advice/Words Of Wisdom</p>
<p>15:45 - 16:00</p>	<p>Thank you, final networking, summary, and conference close.</p>

Agenda & Talk Summaries

Day Two - Friday 29th May 2026

9:30 - 10:00	Arrival and registration
10:00 - 10:10	House Keeping and welcome - Stuart Collier/Laura Roberts - Directors Conservation Chat UK Ltd
10:10 - 10:35	<p>Operation Cetacean - Yesterday's Mission, Tomorrow's Vision - Stu Collier - Conservation Chat UK Ltd/Operation Cetacean</p> <p>A dynamic introduction to a new and exciting project with Operation Cetacean, highlighting efforts to study harbour porpoises and other marine mammals in Torbay and deepen understanding of their conservation needs.</p>
10:35 - 11:00	<p>Surveying for Marine Wildlife at Sea - Rick Morris - MARINELife</p> <p>An engaging insight into MARINELife's ship-based surveys, revealing how wildlife sightings data supports marine conservation.</p>
11:00 - 11:25	<p>Coastal Partnerships - Chloe Nunn - Devon County Council</p> <p>Coasts are home to people, wildlife, and habitats where the land meets the ocean, necessitating that ecology, conservation, commerce, recreation, leisure, transport, culture, tradition, and society co-exist together. Coordinating these activities and needs across governance boundaries requires robust partnerships based on trusting collaborations. Join the Exe Estuary Management Partnership Officer to learn about coastal partnerships in the south west, and the challenges and opportunities presented through local, regional, national, and international collaboration.</p>
11:25 - 11:55	Refreshments break and networking opportunity.
11:55 - 12:20	<p>The Return of the Wanderers - Simon Thomas</p> <p>A deep dive into the return of pelagic sharks to southwest UK waters, exploring their migrations, mysteries, and how science and fisheries data reveal shifting ocean ecosystems.</p>
12:20 - 12:55	<p>South Devon's Seals - Sarah Greenslade & Poppy - The Seal Project</p> <p>A journey into the world of South Devon's seals, exploring how to identify them, understand their behaviour, and interpret what it tells us about their health and welfare. This session also highlights the importance of dedicated year-round monitoring in revealing their movements, habits, and interactions along our coastline, alongside the impacts of marine litter on their environment.</p>
12:55 - 13:55	Lunch and networking
13:55 - 14:05	Speed networking

Agenda & Talk Summaries

<p>14:05 - 14:30</p>	<p>Dolphins on Our Doorstep: England's South Coast Bottlenose Dolphins - Rebecca Dudley - The South Coast Bottlenose Dolphin Consortium</p> <p>The bottlenose dolphins of England's south coast are among the most vulnerable in Europe. These remarkable animals are part of a small, socially distinct population navigating one of the world's busiest marine environments. In this talk, researcher Rebecca Dudley explores what long-term monitoring and citizen science are revealing about their lives. Learn how collaborative science and local partnerships are shaping new conservation strategies to protect these iconic yet threatened coastal dolphins.</p>
<p>14:30 - 14:55</p>	<p>Marine Non-Licensable Activities (mNLA) in Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) - Churchill-Bissett - Marine Management Organisation</p> <p>Marine non-licensable activities (mNLA) — including recreational boating, paddle sports, anchoring, diving and wildlife watching are increasing in scale and diversity across England's inshore Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). Although individually small-scale, these activities can collectively hinder MPAs from achieving their conservation objectives, particularly where sensitive or irreplaceable habitats and mobile species are vulnerable to disturbance or physical damage. In response, the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) has developed a comprehensive assessment and management programme to ensure mNLA pressures do not prevent favourable or recovering condition of MPA features, contributing to statutory Environmental Improvement Plan targets for 2028 and 2042.</p> <p>This presentation introduces the national mNLA project, outlining its evidence-led, proportionate and adaptive approach. The programme spans varied work packages, beginning with screening and site-level assessments across 97 inshore MPAs, supported by literature reviews, stakeholder engagement, and collaborative working through a cross-agency mNLA Working Group. Management interventions will range from voluntary codes and education campaigns to statutory byelaws where necessary, with targeted workstreams on irreplaceable habitats, seagrass, marine wildlife disturbance (SeaSight), and commercial wildlife operators.</p> <p>The project emphasises behaviour change, co-design with local stakeholders, and improved intelligence through tools such as satellite surveys, AIS analysis, and the new SeaSight reporting platform. Monitoring and evaluation will underpin long-term effectiveness, culminating in publication of a national mNLA Decision Document and Monitoring Plan in 2030.</p> <p>This work represents the first integrated, national framework for managing public marine activities in MPAs. It demonstrates how regulators, communities and marine users can work together to protect vital marine ecosystems while enabling sustainable enjoyment of the marine environment.</p>
<p>14:55 - 15:20</p>	<p>Refreshments break and networking opportunity.</p>
<p>15:20 - 15:45</p>	<p>Delegate activity -</p>
<p>15:45 - 16:00</p>	<p>Thank you, final networking, summary, and conference close.</p>

Upcoming Webinars



MARINE MAMMALS OF THE UK: BEGINNER'S WORKSHOP

Marine Mammals of the UK Workshop

Sun 31 May, 10:00 BST

From £20.21



REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS OF THE UK: BEGINNER'S WORKSHOP

Reptiles & Amphibians of the UK: Beginner's Workshop

Sun 7 Jun, 10:00 BST

From £13.70



WORLD OCEANS DAY SPECIAL OCEAN ACIDIFICATION EXPLAINED

World Oceans Day Special: Ocean Acidification Explained

Mon 8 Jun, 18:00 BST

From £6.13



WORLD OCEANS DAY SPECIAL MARINE PROTECTED AREAS - DO THEY REALLY WORK?

World Oceans Day Special- Marine Protected Areas: Do They Really Work?

Mon 8 Jun, 19:30 BST

From £6.13



An Introduction To British Bats and How You Can Help Them

Wed 1 Jul, 19:00 BST

From £5.04



Snakes of the UK

Wed 8 Jul, 17:30 BST

From £5.80

Upcoming Conferences

Don't miss out on Earlybird tickets
for our Autumn conference!



SAVING SPECIES CONFERENCE

BY CONSERVATION CHAT UK LTD

DAY ONE

29th OCTOBER, 2026
9.30am - 4.00pm
Brixham Lab



SAVING SPECIES CONFERENCE

BY CONSERVATION CHAT UK LTD

DAY TWO

30th OCTOBER, 2026
9.30am - 4.00pm
Brixham Lab