



Irish  
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Network

## Shared Island & Ocean



QUEEN'S  
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BELFAST



# Marine Identity: Voices from the Lough

How does knowing where we come from shape where we  
go next?

Strangford Lough's rich maritime heritage and long-standing marine  
research and conservation work come together in this community  
dialogue event at The Narrows, Portaferry.

Keynote Speaker: Dr Bob Brown

Panel Discussion 1: Echoes of the Sea: Maritime Heritage and Memory  
Lunch and exhibitions

Panel Discussion 2: Voices for Future Seas: Biodiversity and ocean stewardship



Wednesday,  
29th April



The Narrows,  
Portaferry



09:30-15.00

## Marine Identity: Voices from the Lough

How does knowing where we come from shape where we go next?

### The Narrows, Portaferry 29/4/26

- 09.30–10.00**    **Arrival and Registration** with tea and coffee
- 10.00–10.15**    **Shared Island & Ocean** -Welcome and Introduction.  
Heidi McIlvenny, QUB/IOLN
- 10.15–10.45**    **Keynote Speaker: Dr Bob Brown**
- 10.45–12.00**    **Panel 1: Echoes of the Sea: Maritime Heritage and Memory**  
*Who we are, where we come from, and how our history shapes us.* This session explores the 'Marine Identity' of the past to provide a foundation for the present. It aims to reconnect and celebrate the rich maritime connections that this area, through exploring history, and living memory connected to the ocean.
- 12.00–13.15**    **Lunch, exhibitions and networking**
- 13.15–14.30**    **Panel 2: Voices for Future Seas: Biodiversity and ocean stewardship**  
*Where we go from here - how we harness our connection to the ocean.* In exploring the global shift in economies, this session focuses on ensuring the community has the capacity and opportunity to engage with the different opportunities the ocean provides moving forward – capitalising on their strong connections and knowledge of the ocean.
- 14:30–15:00**    **Closing remarks**



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### Marine Identity: Voices from the Lough

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#### Keynote Speaker

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##### Dr Bob Brown

Bob Brown was brought up in England, on the Sussex coast, as a child getting soaked exploring for marine beasts and birds. University in Belfast and a PhD on mollusc ecology and oystercatcher feeding, led to research in Sweden and travels to the Arctic, before moving to Jamaica to develop oyster farming based on mangrove systems, as well as lecturing, and rearing hawksbill turtles.



Back in Northern Ireland, for about ten years he managed the National Trust's Strangford Lough Wildlife for its birds and marine wildlife, writing a widely acclaimed book on them. In 1991 he became Director of RSPB's operations in N Ireland. In 2004 he became Chair of the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group; and for nine years contributed to the work of Northern Ireland's Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside, and then the UK's Joint Nature Conservation Committee, chairing their Marine Protected Areas working group. Bob has traveled widely, exploring and lecturing, notably in the Arctic, Scandinavia, Antarctic, and South America. When not travelling he sails his yacht in Irish waters and around the west coast of Scotland. In 2004 he was awarded an OBE for services to nature conservation.

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### Marine Identity: Voices from the Lough

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#### Speakers

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#### Heidi McIlvenny, Queen's University Belfast

Heidi is a marine scientist based in Northern Ireland, currently completing her PhD at Queen's University Belfast. Her research bridges marine ecology and social science, spanning seagrass ecology, blue carbon, cultural ecosystem services, and human-nature relationships.



Beyond academia, Heidi is Director of the Irish Ocean Literacy Network, an all-island network that connects individuals and organisations to advance ocean literacy across Ireland. She has contributed marine specialist expertise to the Office for Environmental Protection and the renewable energy industry, and sits on the regional advisory committees for RSPB and National Trust Northern Ireland.

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### PANEL 1: Echoes of the Sea: Maritime Heritage and Memory

**MODERATOR: Moira Ritchie, Portaferry Sailing Club, Portaferry Community Services Ltd, and The Selkies Sea Shanty Womens Group**

Moira Ritchie is a lifelong resident of Portaferry whose identity is deeply woven into the maritime traditions of Strangford Lough. As the Secretary of the local sailing club and a former youth theatre director, she acts as a custodian of local culture, bridging the gap between generations through storytelling, heritage, and the arts. Moira has been instrumental in developing the Sails and Sounds Festival, celebrating the region's Ulster-Scots maritime links, traditional seafaring skills, and community resilience.



Driven by a commitment to social connection, Moira founded Northern Ireland's first women's sea shanty group and leads vital reminiscence projects to record the fading memories of the Lough's older generations. She currently collaborates with C21 Theatre and local artists to explore coastal identity through creative media, ensuring that the folklore, language, and history of Portaferry are preserved. Her work focuses on anchoring the community to its past while inspiring a future where the Lough remains central to local life and belonging.



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#### SPEAKERS

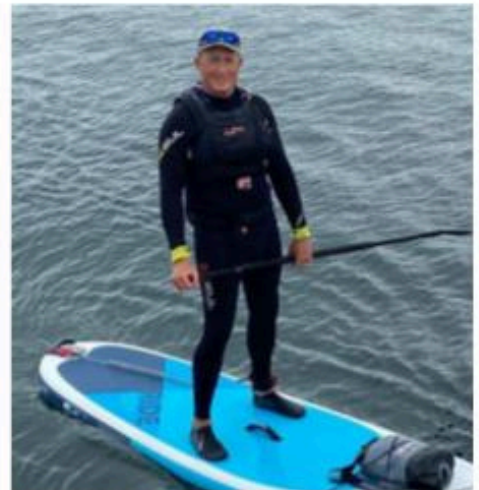
##### **James Elliott, Portaferry and Strangford Trust**

James Elliott is a maritime heritage expert and the co-founder and Chair of the Portaferry and Strangford Trust (PAST). He leads PAST's educational programmes and has contributed to significant research projects, including the BBC podcast "The Mystery of Mountstewart." A founder of the Strangford Coastal Rowing Club, James specialises in the evolution of watercraft and the local archaeology of the Strangford Lough region.



##### **Rory Martin, Strangford Lough Activity Centre**

Rory Martin is the founder of Strangford Lough Activity Centre and a 30-year veteran of the outdoor industry. Despite launching during the 2020 lockdown, he leveraged his extensive coaching and managerial experience to grow the business into a premier residential hub. Today, he leads a team of 15 staff, welcoming thousands of visitors annually to explore the Lough's wildlife and environment through a diverse range of water sports and land-based activities.



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#### SPEAKERS

##### **Duane Fitzsimons, Legends of Lecale Peninsula**

Duane Fitzsimons is a storyteller and historical interpreter. He has been running Legends of Lecale Peninsula for over 10 years. He shares his extensive local heritage knowledge in short videos across social media which explore the rich history of the Strangford Lough region. Duane works for Belfast City Council promoting outdoor recreation.



##### **Isabel Hood, SLLP, SLMPA, and Strangford Coastal Rowing Club**

Isabel Hood is a geographer and biologist who spent her career leading field studies and environmental education in County Down. A former Open University tutor and BEM recipient, she has chaired numerous conservation boards, including Northern Ireland Environment Link. Isabel is a dedicated outdoor enthusiast, sailor, and a founder of the Strangford Coastal Rowing Club.



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#### PANEL 2: Voices for Future Seas: Biodiversity and ocean stewardship

**MODERATOR: Dr Gavin Grant,  
AONB and Geopark Marine and  
Coastal Engagement Officer**

Having a passion for the marine environment since he was a teenager, Dr Gavin Grant was previously an academic and then a DAERA Marine Protected Areas Officer. He is now the Marine and Coastal Engagement Officer for the Newry Mourne and Down AONB and Geopark team.



Gavin's role is to educate and engage a wide range of stakeholders and the general public to promote the responsible use of the marine and coastal areas within the Mourne Gullion Strangford UNESCO Global Geopark, the Ring of Gullion and Strangford & Lecale AONBs (Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty), and the three MPAs (Marine Protected Areas) Strangford Lough, Murlough/Dundrum Bay and Carlingford Lough. He aims to educate and inform users of the incredible biodiversity along our coasts and in our seas, as well as highlighting the importance of protections for priority species and habitats, and best practice to avoid disturbance of these key features.



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#### SPEAKERS

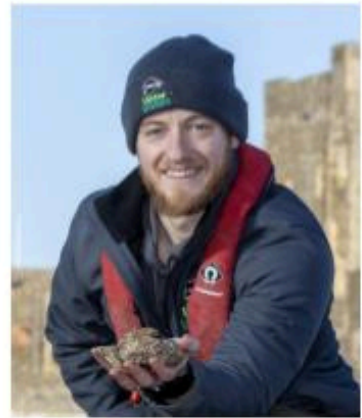
##### **Dr Christine Morrow – Marine scientist and Research Fellow, Queen's University Marine Laboratory**

Dr Christine Morrow specialises in the taxonomy and systematics of marine invertebrates. Her work primarily focuses on the classification and evolutionary history of sponges. Her research includes the study of marine invasive species and the protection of rare underwater habitats, such as those found around Rathlin Island.



##### **Dr Nick Baker Horne, Ulster Wildlife Trust**

Nick Baker-Horne is a marine biologist and PhD researcher who transitioned from studying tidal energy at Queen's University to marine restoration. Now working with Ulster Wildlife, he focuses on restoring native oyster reefs and other vital habitats within the region. Living on the shores of Strangford Lough, Nick combines his professional expertise with a personal passion for observing local wildlife, from seals and otters to diverse marine ecosystems.



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### SPEAKERS

#### Rebekah Bajko, Queen's University Belfast

Rebekah Bajkó is a PhD researcher at Queen's University Belfast, focusing on climate-resilient shellfish reef restoration in Strangford Lough. Based at the Portaferry marine laboratory, she builds on decades of local scientific study to protect marine biodiversity. Rebekah also serves as an outreach officer for Wild Belfast, where she facilitates public engagement, and is a keen diver who enjoys exploring underwater ecosystems firsthand.



#### Paul Stewart, WWT Castle Espie

Paul Stewart is the Centre Manager at WWT Castle Espie, where he leads public engagement and conservation efforts for Ireland's only Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust site. Under his leadership, the centre achieved prestigious international accreditation for excellence in wetland education. Paul also holds key trade union leadership roles, combining his passion for environmental advocacy with professional rights and conservation management.





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Thank you for joining us at our Regional Meeting in Portaferry - ***Marine Identity: Voices from the Lough***

Since its establishment in 2016, the Irish Ocean Literacy Network (IOLN) has brought together like-minded individuals and organisations who passionately believe in the importance of our oceans to the island of Ireland and its citizens. The aim of the network is to improve coordination, collaboration, and capacity building of the island's 'Ocean Citizens' community to achieve a common vision – an Ocean Literate Society across the Island of Ireland.

The IOLN aims to support initiatives and collaboration between members, to provide a platform for engagement with coastal communities, and to provide training and capacity building opportunities for IOLN Members.

If you are interested in learning more about the work of the IOLN, please contact our Executive Officer Cat McCann at [Cat@ioln.ie](mailto:Cat@ioln.ie)



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