

Argyll coast ranked alongside the South Pacific for rich marine life



The west coast of Scotland is well known for the abundance of wildlife found above and below the waves. Now an international charity has declared it the UK's first Hope Spot. **JODY HARRISON** reports

IT is a landscape that seems like a storybook come to life, where jagged cliffs loom over white-sand beaches buffeted by crystalline blue seas.

Weathered stone castles stand like sentries along the dramatic coast, and beneath the surface lie hidden secrets. Wrecks are preserved and an abundance of marine life swarms the ocean floor, while majestic whales, dolphin, seals and porpoises swim serenely above.

Now Scotland's Argyll coast has another note to add to its distinctiveness, after being declared the first Hope Spot in the UK by international charity Mission Blue.

The area, stretching from Loch Sunart, past the Isle of Mull to the Sound of Jura and Knapdale, is home to an incredibly rich ecosystem of corals, sea grasses, fish and marine animals.

It was recommended for the designation by four local groups – CAOLAS, the Craignish Restoration of Marine and Coastal Habitat (CROMACH), Friends of the Sound of Jura and Save Seil Sound – who came together under the banner of the The Coastal Communities Network.

Hope Spots have been adopted by dozens of important sites around the globe as a way of raising awareness and

to put pressure on world leaders to protect the marine environment.

Being counted in their number means the sea lochs, deep-water sounds, peninsulas and islands of the Argyll coast are ranked alongside areas such as the Gulf of California, the Sydney coast and the Coral Sea in the South Pacific.

Oceanographer Dr Sylvia Earle, founder of Mission Blue, said: "The Argyll coast is a place of great beauty, but also of great importance. It's home to not only great people, with a love and appreciation for the sea, but of such a wonderful mix of creatures, from dolphins, whales and seals to otters and birds.

"Congratulations on the first Hope Spot in Scotland and mainland United Kingdom."

The Argyll coast comprises four statutory Marine Protected Areas at its heart, and is one of the most biodiverse areas across Scotland's waters.

Home to native native oysters, flame shell mussels, meadows of sea grass and vast colonies of seabirds, it also plays host to harbour porpoises, minke whales and other cetaceans.

The area shelters one of Scotland's rarest animals – the three-metre long flapper skate, said to be at greater risk of

extinction than the giant panda, yet few Scots have ever heard of the fish.

Parts of the seabed have rocky reefs, covered in soft corals, feather stars and northern sea fans, while there are also spectacular reef-building tube worms and a pink coralline alga called maerl which can live for thousands of years.

However, these complex habitats provide vital nurseries for other animals, including commercially valuable fish and crustaceans, which are especially vulnerable to pollution from fish farms and the illegal dredging for scallops.

John Aitchison, of the Friends of Jura Sound, said becoming a Hope Spot was a good way to raise the profile of the area across the globe.

He said: "There are so many communities along the coast whose livelihoods and enjoyment depend on the sea being healthy.

"We hope that its designation as Scotland's first Hope Spot will encourage more people to get involved and to appreciate the life below the surface that is right on their doorsteps.

"This is a community-led initiative, so the four coastal community groups that proposed the Argyll coast and islands area are delighted that this area has become the first Mission Blue Hope Spot in Scotland and the mainland UK. The groups all belong to Scotland's Coastal Communities Network.

"The UN's latest biodiversity report tells us that a million species, one in

All creatures great and small

Minke whale: Growing up to 10 metres long and weighing five tonnes, they travel through the area in small groups.

Maerl: A distinctive purple-pink hard seaweed which forms underwater 'carpets'.

Otters: Sleek and solitary mammals. Around half of Scotland's 8,000 population is thought to live on the coast.

Long-spined sea scorpion: Spiny, four-inch-long fish, which is famed for its aggressive hunting skills.

Harbour porpoise - Smallest of the cetaceans found in Scottish waters.

Seven-arm starfish: Large, red or orange-brown starfish which grows to 40 cm across.

Volcano worms: Giant worms, said to look like a slimy gherkin.

eight, face extinction within decades due to human activity.

"Hope Spots celebrate and recognise the global importance of their marine biodiversity and aim to encourage people living in and alongside them to cherish, protect and restore it.

"In Scotland, the Argyll coast and islands Hope Spot has greater marine biodiversity than anywhere besides St Kilda."

Annabel Lawrence, of the Community Association of Lochs and Sounds, said: "We want to encourage our coastal communities to be more engaged and aware of what is happening just off their shores.

"The more people get to know and understand the wonders of this marine ecosystem, the more likely they will care about how it is looked after and what factors can impact upon the success of future protection and restoration of this unique and finite resource.

"Throughout history, coastal communities have been at the forefront of adaption and innovation.

"The community groups that have come together and immersed themselves in the conservation of the west coast of Scotland's marine ecosystems are proof that we can make a difference in local communities which create ripples across the world."

Ms Lawrence added: "Taking care of the local marine environment will ensure the sustainable future of the ocean, and the right framework is in place to make it happen. We just have to take the plunge."