

## Sea Life on Wrecks

By Edward Bourke

Shipwrecks mean several things in the natural world. The first that springs to mind is the danger of pollution by fuel oil from the ship's engines or worse still if the cargo itself is oil, such as in a tanker. However shipwrecks can also be of huge benefit to the eco system.



A wreck will be covered in sea life only a year after it sinks.

When a steel ship lands on a firm sandy ocean bottom it becomes a raised feature on an otherwise smooth, though constantly moving seabed. Sand does not form a secure home for most creatures except those that specialise in burrowing down for shelter. A wreck however is a secure anchorage and anything that can grip the surface finds itself living off the bottom where crabs are less likely to attack. The current will be faster away from the sea bottom and the



Shipwrecks provide a home for animals such as scallops and anemones.

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flow of water brings food for creatures that live by filtering plankton from the water. It is not surprising therefore that a wreck will be covered in sea life only a year after it sank. If it is shallow enough for light to reach it, seaweed will grow and attach to the metal. Kelp particularly has strong gripping power and resists the current quite easily. It can be so strong that a scuba diver can pull himself from stalk to stalk against a current.



Anemones grow in large numbers on shipwrecks

Anemones seem to like shipwrecks especially and grow there in large numbers, making shelter for many smaller creatures. The anemones capture small plankton in their frilly tentacles and digest it using digestive juices known as enzymes. It is amazing to see how many of these creatures can cover a wreck until it is hard to tell it apart from a rock until examined more closely.



A Home for Congers

If metal plates fall from the side of the ship to lie flat on the bottom they provide homes for lobsters and conger eels. Here they can hide from bigger fish and can also dart out and grab passing prey from their hidden positions. Conger eels rarely feel the need to come out far and free-swimming congers are rarely seen. A conger can grow extremely long. A conger was caught on a line at Howth, in Co. Dublin, a few years ago. It was 4.8m (16 feet) long and weighed 27kg (60lb). Sometimes you see only the head but you can go several feet along and see the tail through another hole and hardly believe that it is all the same fish. Congers have a fearful reputation among anglers because they have powerful jaws and a severe bite. This only seems to happen when they are out of the water and aggressive. Underwater they are shy and retiring. Congers on a wreck at Rathlin Island, Co. Antrim, are used to being fed bread by divers and have become quite tame.



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