

Visions of our Living Seas

Yorkshire-based artist **Anna Kirk-Smith** has won The Wildlife Trusts' Underwater Award presented in association with The Society of Wildlife Artists. Here she explains her new take on the wildlife in the North Sea – from an underwater perspective.

When I first applied for the bursary to fund diving lessons I wrote that I lived very close to the sea, and that after completing the diving bursary, when I walk to the end of the road each morning I would be looking out at a whole new world. It seemed rather lyrical at the time. However, I did not even begin to comprehend how utterly true this actually would be. This experience has indeed changed my life and my intended course from here on.

The scuba diving training was completed over five, wet weeks: I communed with rainbow trout and sturgeon in a flooded quarry before progressing into the salty stuff. The sea dives were off Flamborough Head in East Yorkshire.

A unique site in many respects, it is known for its chalk reefs, kelp beds and partially submerged sea caves, which are inhabited by a diverse array of marine wildlife. These features in turn are fed by the 'Flamborough Front' phenomenon mentioned in the artwork. The headland is also 'home' to me and a well-known stomping ground of mine, however, previously explored only as the tides dictated.

Drawing underwater proved to be one of the easier aspects, armed as I was with neat, little waterproof notebooks and pencils tied down to stop them floating away. A more tricky issue was the field of visibility or lack of it: an all pervading brown, sandy haze or shimmering, greenish, weed-filled fog are attractive in

"Anna's work helps raise awareness"

Kat Sanders, Marine Awareness & Research Officer for Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, says: "Anna's commitment to the marine environment has been apparent from the beginning. She has always been clear that she wants to use and build on her diving skills to support Yorkshire Wildlife Trust's Living Seas work long-term. And, as a talented artist, she brings invaluable benefits and a unique perspective to our awareness-raising activities. We are thrilled and proud that Anna and her finished artwork have represented our region at the SWLA's London exhibition."



Back on dry land: Anna Kirk-Smith at the SWLA exhibition.

their own special way, but not so easy to capture with a HB pencil. The detail, the closeness and the intimacy of encounters with marine species in what is, after all, their world, are beautiful and strangely humbling experiences. One could watch for hours, if the air supply allowed.

Upon returning to shore I'd sometimes sit in the surf, a convenient halfway house, continuing to draw or write recollections of my time under the waves. This habit was often met with sideways glances from the folk on the beach, but it stopped me returning to land too soon.

The artwork here has a sense of randomness about it, although it is based around a core theme of Flamborough Head Marine Reserve and the Wildlife Trust's vision to create 'Living Seas'. The random nature comes from the diversity of approaches, information and encounters I experienced while using the bursary and researching this theme. To consider such a place, one cannot help but dip into its marine and social heritage, the political management, the scientific surveying and biodiversity

Above and below: Anna's work has drawn visitors to SWLA's annual exhibition in London, and is raising awareness of marine life in the North Sea and what is being done to protect it.



Below: Anna in the water at Flamborough. It's the perfect site to find inspiration, as it is teeming with marine life. Right: More of her pictures.



KAT SANDERS

as well as its visual appearance, because each and every one of these is intrinsic to its future success, and consequently the success of its marine wildlife.

Now I have begun this journey, I have no intention that it will be a one-off. I am already booked in to further my training as a diver. I shall work towards being qualified enough to volunteer for the very worthy Seasearch dives, and I cannot begin to count the many ideas for artworks, interpretations, scientific collaborations and methods of working underwater that have been flooding forth from my mind.

Winning and using this bursary has been a steep learning curve in many ways. It has given me the opportunity to learn to scuba dive so I can study more closely our marine wildlife – something I've wanted to do for as long as I can remember. Firstly, greatest of thanks go to Steve Grainger, from Overland Underwater, whose good (if slightly

twisted!) humour and sterling tuition shaped my aqueous floundering into a passable effort at a functioning diver. Secondly, to Kat Sanders from the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, who is the fountain of all knowledge marine, dedicated to the cause in a fun sort of way and overseer of my inaugural sea dive. And my thanks also to Tanya Perdikou, from The Wildlife Trusts, for her relentless optimism in email format and



ferocious media pursuit. This just leaves me to thank everyone else in The Wildlife Trusts who helped to bring about this marvellous experience, and the SWLA committee for presenting the possibility of it, and coping with the aftermath. It's been amazing.