Coasteering in Wales

by Geoff Cooper

Introduction

Coasteering is a relatively new outdoor activity which has developed in Pembrokeshire and is spreading to other coastal areas of Britain. It involves a mixture of sea level traversing, scrambling, surf swimming and cliff jumping to produce a blend of climbing, scrambling and swimming to access caves, plunge pools and white water. The main activity centres which organise coasteering activities in the National Park have all signed up to the Pembrokeshire Outdoor Charter, which means they are dedicated to looking after the environment.

The Pembrokeshire Coast National Park recognise the attraction of the new activity and at the same time suggest there is little damage to the environment:

"As well as being great fun, coasteering can also provide a completely new view of the coast, seeing the cliffs at close quarters in some of the most remote and quiet spots you can find. Properly controlled, it does not disturb cliff-nesting birds, seals and their pups or plants that grow in the cliff crevices."

A recent report, "*Assessment of the Potential Impacts of Coasteering on Rocky Inter-tidal Habitats in Wales*" published by the Marine Life Information Network for the Countryside Council for Wales questions this view. There is concern that the majority of coastlines where coasteering takes place lie within the Pembrokeshire Marine Species Area of Conservation (SAC), and are also Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and there is a need to assess potential damage of these sensitive environments.

Assessing the impact

The 129 page report includes an extensive literature review of previous research which revealed that certain seaweeds, coral-like species, were susceptible to trampling. Some of these inter-tidal species are considered to be nationally important. A direct survey of the impact of trampling as a result of coasteering was commissioned. It was important to understand the nature of the activity before setting up the survey. The report outlines the potential conflict:

In practice, coasteering involves walking to the top of rocks, decending/ascending steep rocky inclines, cliffs and gulleys, and then jumping into the waters below. Participants may then swim along to other parts of the shore and scramble over the rock surfaces at the bottom of the shore as they leave the water on route to another rock surface or gully. Any impacts on the rocky intertidal habitats therefore stem from direct physical contact between people and the species present.

Physical damage

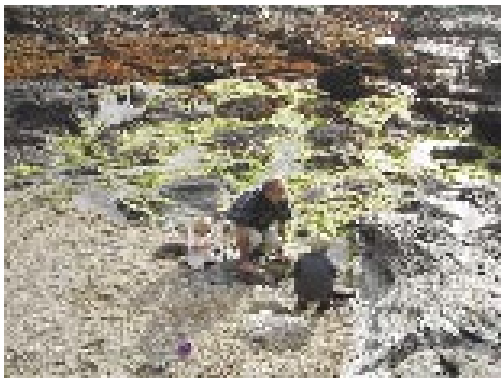
The following types of physical contact and hence physical disturbance can be envisaged:

1. Physical contact and knocking off of plants and animals from gully walls while jumping into the water, or by people being pushed against the walls by wave action.
2. Brushing against and touching of barnacle and other shell creatures and plants on overhangs and vertical surfaces, while swimming between parts of the shore.
3. Collection of souvenir organisms.
4. Pulling on seaweeds, especially kelps in the lower shore and underwater fringe, as handholds while scrambling out of the water.
5. Trampling over rock surfaces, whilst walking between parts of shore, climbing inclines, or scrambling out of the water.
6. Trampling on rock surfaces while waiting in turn to jump, i.e. pivoting and waiting in one spot.

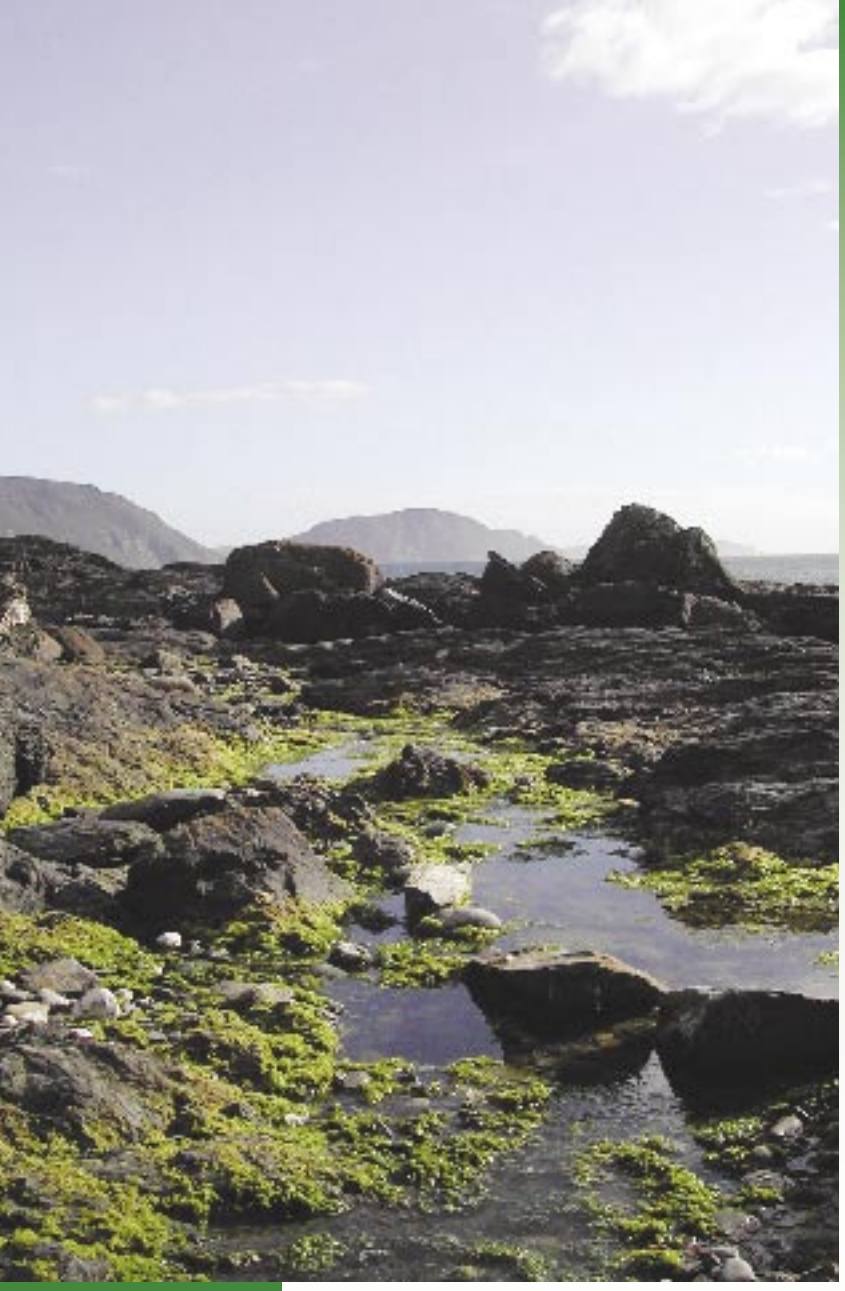
Conclusions

The following conclusions were made in the report:

1. The impacts of trampling on rocky shore communities are relatively poorly studied, especially in the UK.
2. Most of the available literature focuses on sloping, publicly accessible shores that are moderately wave exposed or sheltered and, therefore, may not be directly applicable to the types of shore on which coasteering activities occur.



next page



previous page

3. The available evidence suggests that leafy canopy forming seaweeds and algae are particularly intolerant and sensitive to trampling impacts. Trampling was shown to damage corals and barnacles, and result in an increase in bare space. In some cases paths across the shore were visible.
4. On brown seaweed dominated shores, underlying seaweeds and algae may suffer due to increased drying out and be replaced by algal turf species and gastropod grazers (e.g. limpets) as an indirect effect of trampling.
5. Trampling impacts result from physical contact and wear and are dependant on the intensity, duration, and frequency of trampling, and even the type of footwear used.
6. Coasteering is a seasonal activity, and species may or may not recover over the winter period. Therefore, intolerance rather than sensitivity is seen as a better indicator of potential vulnerability.
7. A total of 19 intolerant rocky inter-tidal species were identified as potentially vulnerable to trampling and, hence, coasteering within the Pembrokeshire marine SAC. Of these, six are of Welsh importance and eight are nationally rare or scarce.
8. In addition, attention has been drawn to the potential vulnerability of delicate slow-growing lichen communities and underwater fringe communities.
9. Nevertheless, trampling is a highly localised impact and it has not been possible to identify specific species' communities actually impacted by coasteering activities in the Pembrokeshire marine SAC.
10. Direct survey of the routes used by coasteering groups within the Pembrokeshire marine SAC is required to identify the intensity, duration and frequency of trampling impact, together with the communities impacted.
11. Given the paucity of data concerning trampling effects in the rocky intertidal in the UK, a survey of the impacts of coasteering would provide an opportunity to examine the effects of trampling and visitor use on steep rocky, wave exposed shores.

Recommendations

1. The routes used by coasteering groups in the Pembrokeshire marine SAC should be surveyed directly, to establish the trampling intensity and the communities present and hence any intolerant and/or important biotopes and species affected.
2. Coasteering groups should avoid rare and scarce species if present and where possible.
3. Any management should be proactive, and engage with the coasteering proprietors to develop a management regime. Wherever possible, past experience and environmental codes of practice developed by other outdoor organisations should be drawn on as models for good environmental conduct and management practice.
4. A "minimising your footprint" guide for coasteerers should be produced and made available to all coasteering groups.
5. Coasteering groups should be encouraged to put something back by undertaking recording designed for volunteers to assess climate change impacts and non-native species concerns.

Comment

Coasteering is a diverse and exciting activity which brings participants into close contact with nature. This report raises awareness of potential damage to particular rare and sensitive habitats. Given the environmental interest of many of the outdoor organisations involved in coasteering it should be possible to manage the situation through codes of good practice.

The full report is on the IOL Website www.outdoor-learning.org
Details of original report will soon be available on www.outdoor-learning.org/news.htm

Similarities:

Some 25 years ago, gill scrambling became a popular group activity in the Lake District and other parts of upland Britain. There was similar concern about damage to habitats from this activity and the Adventure and Environmental Awareness Group was set up specifically to raise awareness of such issues and seek out management solutions. There are many good examples throughout Britain where this has been achieved. Some of these are described on the AEA Group website: www.aea.org.uk

■

Geoff Cooper is head of Wigan Council's outdoor education centres and chairman of the Adventure and Environmental Awareness Group.

Photographs by the editor.

(Isle of Man not Pembroke)

Other photos from the IOL library.