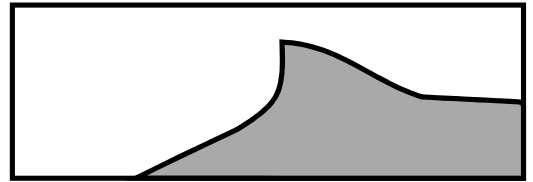


South Wales Porpoise Project

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POD APPEAL Howie Watkins with a Pod similar to the one which has gone missing near Kenfig. Left, a porpoise.

HELP FIND OUR POD

A £15,000 project that has confirmed the presence of a secretive species of marine mammal in the sea off Kenfig is in danger of sinking without trace.

A sophisticated piece of scientific equipment called a Pod – which had been detecting porpoise in the Bristol Channel every day – has gone missing.

The project is being run by the South Wales Porpoise Project and member Howie Watkins, who has appeared in TV programmes such as *The Really Wild Show*, said it was a “huge blow” to its work.

He added: “We’re working on a very limited budget, so if we have to replace this Pod it will be a major setback.”

Five Pods, which resemble pieces of drain pipe and cost £1,500 each, were placed in the Bristol Channel in a line from Kenfig to Carmarthen Bay in December. Pod 109, off Kenfig, was discovered missing at the weekend. Mr Watkins said the Pods were tuned to pick up the unique high-frequency clicks made by porpoise as they navigated their way through the sea.

“Although they have only been in the water for two months, we’ve already made some fascinating new discoveries.

Abby Alford

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“The Pod that’s gone missing had previously recorded porpoises nearly every day in the Kenfig area. They’ve never been seen there before and no-one expected us to find any,” he said.

“The missing Pod could literally be anywhere. It may have washed up on a beach or a curious fisherman may have removed it.

“We labelled all their marker buoys and the Pod itself is also labelled, but we’re worried that sunlight and salt water may have faded the lettering.

“There’s also an identification label inside, but in the current political climate I wouldn’t be surprised if someone who found it was too scared to open it in case it was a bomb or something.”

Mr Watkins said: “Please, if you find the Pod get in touch with me on 01639 633947. Our work depends on it.”

● The South Wales Porpoise Project is carrying out its research in the Bristol Channel with financial help from the Countryside Council for Wales and Bridgend, Neath and Swansea councils.

Well-known porpoise area

PORPOISE are smaller than dolphins, and the smallest member of the whale and dolphin (cetacean) family.

They have a more rounded body shape and generally shy away from boats, unlike dolphins, which often follow vessels and leap out of the water.

Their dorsal fin is also smaller and triangular, unlike the larger, sickle-shaped dorsal fin of dolphins and they lack the distinct nose or beak seen on many dolphins.

Porpoise feed exclusively on fish and can often be spotted inshore, pursuing prey in the strong tidal

currents around rocky headlands.

But their shy and secretive nature makes them hard to study as onlookers will usually only see their fin and a small part of their dark-grey back above the water.

South West Pembrokeshire is well known as one of the most important porpoise areas of the north-east Atlantic, but little is known about their occurrence off the coast of South Wales and important questions, such as whether they breed here and how far they travel, have yet to be answered.