

## **Codes of Practice for research in Voluntary Marine Conservation Areas**

Voluntary Marine Conservation Areas (VMCAs) have been established as local initiatives in areas where the marine biology is considered important for conservation, scientific study and for education. Many VMCAs have established facilities that help the public to enjoy the marine life there. Most VMCAs are now within statutory marine protected areas and the facilities, goals and advisory groups established by them are of great importance.

One of the earliest VMCAs was at Wembury in South Devon. The area was and is greatly valued by staff and students at the Marine Biological Association and at the University of Plymouth. Much has been learned about marine ecology by studies there. The Wembury VMCA was established in 1981 “in recognition of the important marine communities in the area ... and ... the need to safeguard those communities given the range of recreational and commercial activities practised over the area” (from the draft Management Plan: Michael Hughes Associates, 1991). However, that management plan did not address research activities which, in recent years have been a significant use of the area.

Following concerns that some research and educational activities may be adversely affecting the value of parts of the area as ‘undisturbed’, members of the research community, the Marine Centre management and representatives of the Wembury VMCA Advisory Group met to prepare a code of practice that would continue to allow reasonable use of the area for research and education but would minimise damage to its marine natural heritage ([click here to view Code of Practice](#)).

That code of practice is reproduced here as an example of the sort of agreement that can be reached to minimise adverse effects from research and educational activities in a marine protected area that is not strictly protected. Whilst it is labelled as a “Working Draft”, it is better considered as a ‘Living Document’ that can be amended when new information arises or new activities proposed.

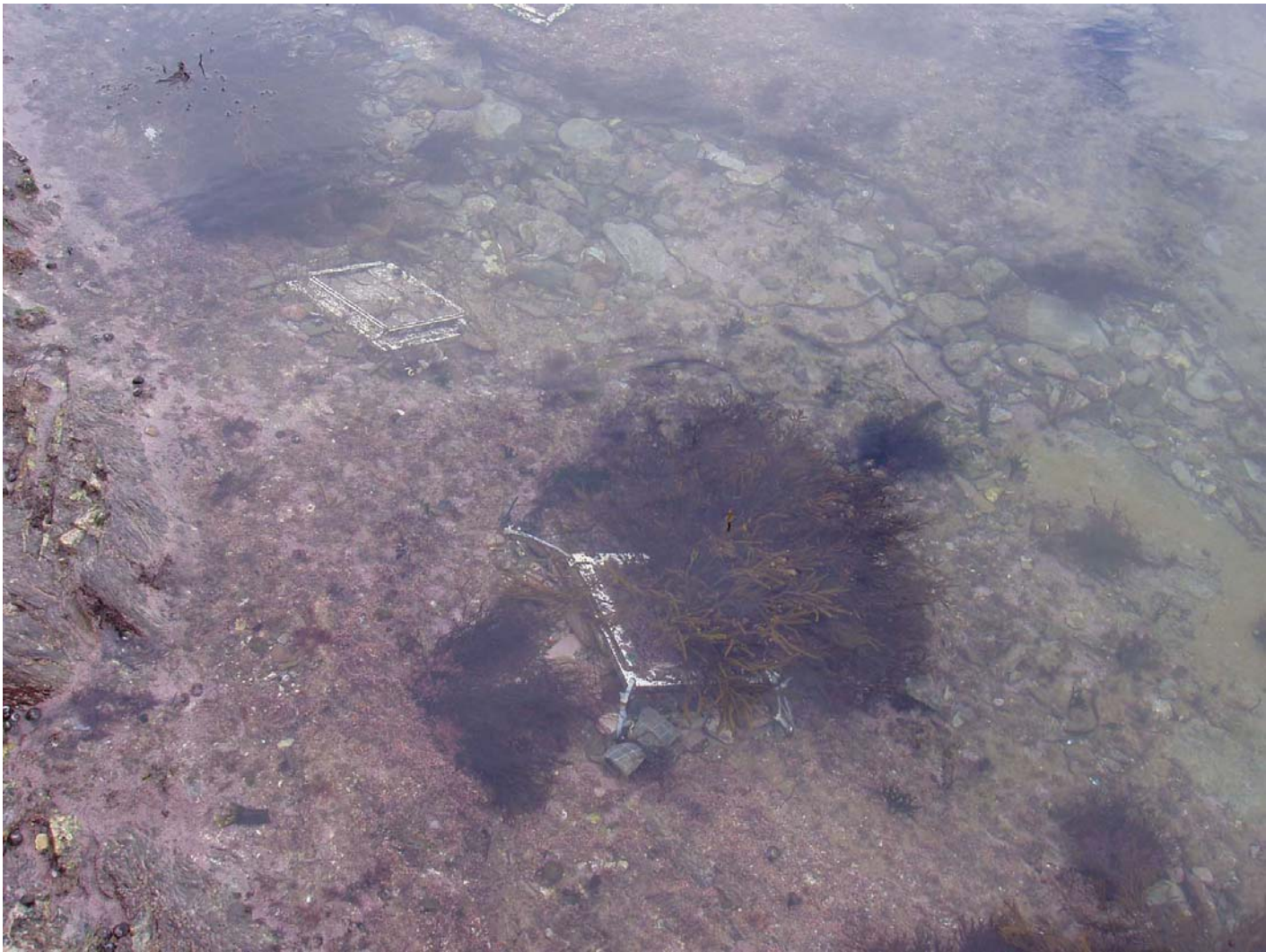
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Rockpool ramble in Britain's first VMCA at Lundy (established in 1973), now statutory Marine Nature Reserve and Special Area of Conservation. Disturbance during rockpooling can be reduced by codes-of-conduct.



Large numbers of the public can take part in sea shore safaris risking significant damage to intertidal communities unless codes of practice are firmly adhered to.



Experimental panels in a rock pool at Wembury. Following completion of the study, the panels were removed.



Studies that do not involve collecting but help students to understand marine ecology are particularly welcome and appropriate activities in a VMCA.



Exclusion experiments may be obtrusive and a trip hazard.



Turning boulders to investigate rich under boulder fauna can cause minimal damage if the boulders are replaced in exactly the same place and crustaceans, echinoderms and fish that may be crushed are displaced outside of the danger area. Under boulder community at Wembury.



Sustainable fishing (for lobsters in this image) need not be discouraged except in highly protected areas.



Commercial harvesting of some species (winkle picking in the Yealm) may be sustainable and not discouraged.