

Marine Biological Association

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The secret life of lugworms – citizen scientists are needed to help shed light on the sex life of this sediment-dwelling worm

Love is in the air again this year along our coastlines and University of Portsmouth needs your help to keep an eye out for signs of passion in the lugworm population.

The lugworm, *Arenicola marina*, is a vital source of food for wader birds and fish as well as playing a key role in fisheries as a source of bait.

Volunteers are being asking to keep an eye out for any signs of love within the lugworm population on sandy shores around the UK.

This species spends its life in a burrow in the sediment so opportunities to meet a mate are limited. Instead, the males release sperm which collects in “puddles” on the surface of the beach. When the tide comes in, the sperm is washed down into the burrows of the females and fertilises her eggs.

Not a lot is known about the process - all that we do know is that specific environmental conditions are needed to trigger the release of the sperm and the egg at the same time. So scientists are calling on members of the public to join them as “citizen scientists” to help fill in the knowledge gaps.

The “Spermwatch” project is part of a wider conservation project called Capturing Our Coast funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. It is a partnership led by Newcastle University including Portsmouth, Bangor & Hull Universities, Marine Conservation Society, Marine Biological Association, Scottish Association of Marine Sciences and Earthwatch Europe.

Zoe Morrall, Capturing Our Coast Project Officer at the University of Portsmouth’s Institute of Marine Sciences, said “Not a lot is known about lugworm reproduction and it is fascinating how the entire population of a species spawn, just for a few days every year, only when the environmental conditions are perfect.”

“By continuing last year’s study, and adding temperature data loggers to some sites it means we can better understand which conditions are important for a spawning event. We will also be able to understand how climate change may affect these events. By going out for a walk on any sandy beach across the UK, members of the public can get involved and help us answer these questions.”

The study starts on the 22nd October and runs until 1st December 2017 and people are asked to collect data every three days from one of 12 different sites around the UK. It should take around 45 minutes and it is an ideal way to take part in ‘hands-on’ science whilst just walking along a beach – all you have to do is download an instruction book from <https://www.capturingourcoast.co.uk/specific-information/spermwatch> and get recording.

-Ends-

Notes to editors:

Filming and interview opportunities are available. Please contact:

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About the Heritage Lottery Fund

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