NATIONAL TOURISM MONITORING PROGRAMME 2021-2025

ANNUAL RESULTS FOR 2021

LOOP HEAD

for: **Fáilte Ireland**

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Contents

Loop Head – Interesting Finds 3

1 Loop Head 4

1.1 Purpose & Outputs of the Programme 4

1.2 Methods & Surveys 5

1.2.1 Visitor Characterisation Survey 5

1.2.2 Ecological & Path Assessments 5

1.2.3 Other Surveys 6

1.3 Site Description of Loop Head 6

1.4 Pathways and Features Condition Results 7

1.4.1 Pathway Condition 7

1.4.2 Features Condition 8

1.4.3 Hazards 9

1.5 Visitor Characterisation Survey 9

1.6 Ecological Monitoring Results 15

1.6.1 Ecological Constraints 15

1.6.2 Habitat Descriptions 15

1.6.3 Condition Assessment 16

1.6.4 Mammals on Site 16

1.6.5 Wintering Bird Survey 17

1.7 Recommendations 18

Loop Head – Interesting Finds

ECOLOGICAL HIGHLIGHTS

Loop Head is well-known site for watching migratory birds as well as off shore whales and dolphins. Fulmars and Kittiwakes breed on the northern tip of Loop Head and Dermot and Grania's Rock. The cliffs at Bullaunnaleama host colonies of Guillemots, Razorbills and Kittiwakes

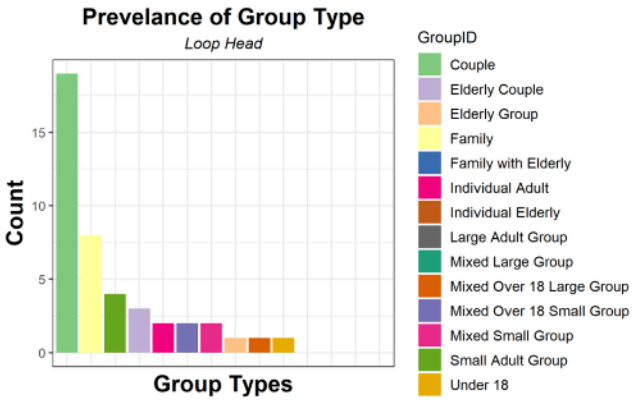
Loop Head also hosts a large population of grey seal

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Vehicular access to the heathlands beyond the carpark should be managed– there is evidence that the vegetated habitats are used as an overspill carpark which the site is full.
- Trail network management should be explored; trail marking and stabilisation as one option or the use of a dynamic trail management system which could alleviate the pressures which are occurring.
- Habitat management strategies could be developed for the site to increase the floral diversity of the grass and heathland habitats on site.
- Introduce signage with respect to the resident population of breeding guillemots.

VISITOR NUMBERS AND DWELL TIME

- 124 people visited the site over 8 hours
- Average dwell time of 27 minutes



VISITOR INTERACTION & MANAGEMENT

- Visitor interactions on site well controlled with strong management practices in place.
- Nearly 80% of all activities undertaken were considered to be low level activities such as dog walking and jogging.
- Of impacts that were noted, the majority were considered low level impacts such as trampling of vegetation and light desire lines
- Most of the visitors to the site stayed for at least 27 minutes –given the relatively small nature of the site.
- Majority of visitors did not read signage that was available on site.




1 Loop Head

1.1 Purpose & Outputs of the Programme

Building on the success of the Wild Atlantic Way (WAW) environmental monitoring programme which ran from 2015-2019 – Fáilte Ireland has decided to expand the programme to a national level. The programme will monitor 19 individual sites located in all of Fáilte Irelands regional areas; The Wild Atlantic Way, Irelands Hidden Heartlands, Irelands Ancient East and Dublin. The programme will run for 5 years from 2021-2025.

The sites that are included in the programme vary in type from inland forest parks, to coastal sites, to privately owned attractions and diverse urban locations - can be seen below.

The purpose of the programme is as follows:

- To gain more insight from an environmental perspective as to what is happening at a variety of sites where we encourage visitors to frequent,
- To gather information (visitor behaviour, movement, path and trail conditions, surveys for birds, flora etc) for each site over the course of 5 years,
- To understand if there are observable trends and/or observable variations amongst site types over a 5-year period,
- To note good & bad practice at sites in order to;
- Make recommendations where appropriate for site management which is intended will have

sustainable benefits for the site, the visitor and the natural environment.

The Wild Atlantic Way Environmental Monitoring Programme allowed us to monitor the behaviour & movement of over 26,000 visitors, identify where there were stresses on the environment or potential future risks as well as good and bad practice.

This culminated in our ability to make useful recommendations to site owners and managers and ultimately to development a practical set of Guidelines for Visitor management (from Planning thorough to Site Operation).

It is hoped that we can build on the learnings of this previous programme and by engaging with site managers, to knowledge share, can enhance the information that we gather for each site chosen nationally for this new programme.

The key areas of focus within the data being gathered is to answer the following questions:

- How do the learning outcomes from the WAW monitoring compare when using repeat measures at fixed locations over a long period? Hence, what are the predictors of impact occurrence and severity?
- Following on from the WAW monitoring data – with the refined methods we aim to understand what activities cause which impact; and what are the factors which influence these activity choices in visitors?
- Understanding visitor movement patterns with respect to ranging behaviours – i.e., is there a distance threshold where impacts are less severe or negligible?
- Undertake pathway condition assessments to understand the relative sensitivities or tolerances of path types to visitor movements – taking note of habitat type and visitor numbers/load capacity.

These questions will be answered upon completion of the full suite of surveys and data collected annually over the course of the monitoring programme. However, each year will have annual interim reports to enable emerging findings and management recommendation to be identified and shared with the relevant stakeholders to support progressive management practices.

1.2 Methods & Surveys

The following surveys were undertaken at Loop Head:

1.2.1 Visitor Characterisation Survey

Visitor characterisation surveys were undertaken at each of the monitoring sites during the weekend period between June-August. The survey at Loop Head was undertaken on the 19th of June 2021, with max temperatures reaching approximately 18° C, no rainfall and low levels of wind on the day[1]. These surveys followed an 8-hour time period recording samples of visitor behaviour of an many visitors on site as possible. Visitor movement patterns, demographic data and activities undertaken were recorded for all sampled visitors. Where activities had associated impacts, these were also recorded and the relevant severity was recorded using the same coding system as with the WAW monitoring (see Appendix I for details). It is important to note that the visitor characterisation surveys are indiscriminate between visitors and local amenity use.

1.2.2 Ecological & Path Assessments

In addition to the visitor movement and behavioural records an ecological assessment and path network assessment was undertaken at each site. This consisted of mapping all tracks and trails – with records of hazards, notable damage etc. In addition to this, all habitats were mapped according to the Fossitt Habitat coding system while information on bird populations was gathered from National Biodiversity Centre Data.

[1] Weather data gathered from: https://www.met.ie/climate/available-data/historical-data

1.2.3 Other Surveys

Additional sample surveys were undertaken at Loop Head to identify the species presence of wintering birds and mammals. This information can inform potential management actions related to amenity services such as lighting which could conflict with sensitive species on site.

1.3 Site Description of Loop Head

Loop Head contans attractions such as the Loop Head lighthouse (Figure 1.1), access to water sports and boat journeys to view marine mammals. It is also a Signature Discovery Point on the Wild Atlantic Way. The area itself is completely encompassed by the Loop Head SPA and the Lower Shannon SAC with expected habitats that range from dry siliceous heath.

Figure 1.1 Loop Head

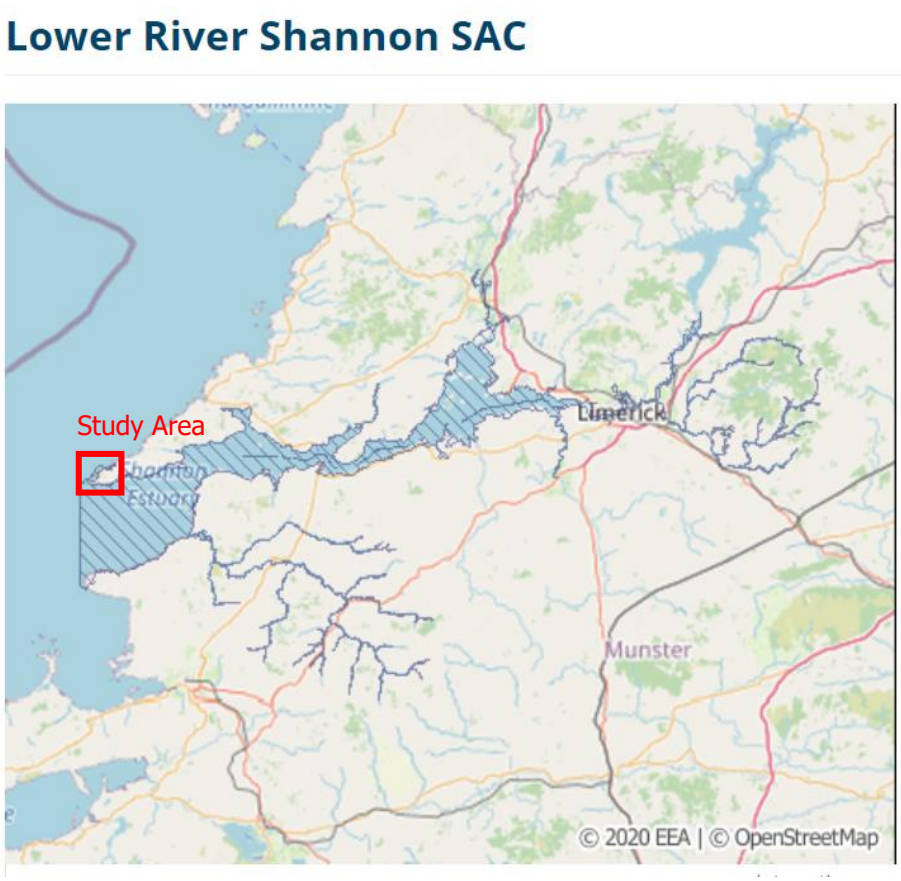


Figure 1.2 Study Area within Lower River Shannon SAC

1.4 Pathways and Features Condition Results

1.4.1 Pathway Condition

The paths at Loop Head mainly consist of managed pathways which are of varying width. These pathways also show localised severe levels of soil compaction along with evident trampling due to walkers. There is also a small section of hard infrastructure pathways which were seen to have slight damage at the road side.

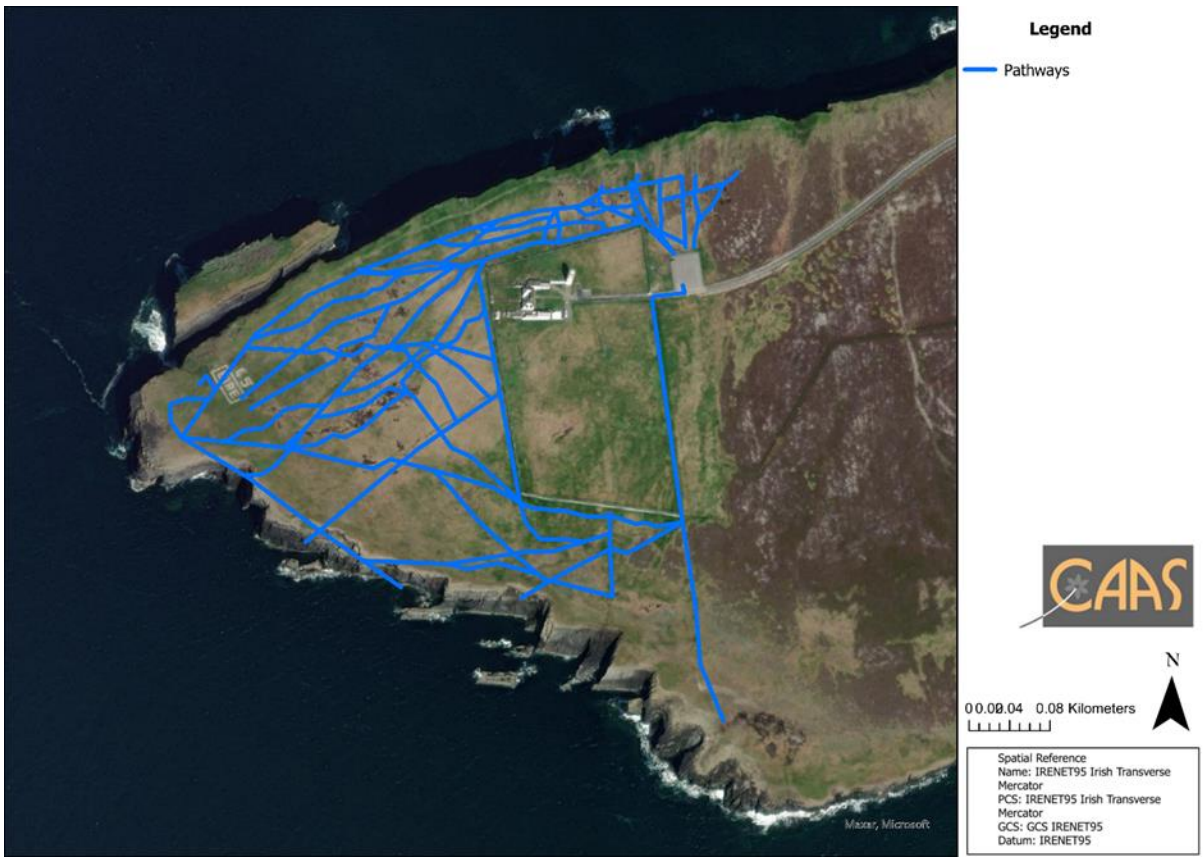


Figure 1.3 Pathways identified at Loop Head

1.4.2 Features Condition

Other than the lighthouse at Loop Head itself, there are not many features on this site. There is also a car park on site which is used by visitors. In regards to signage, there are multiple signs which warn visitors of potentially dangerous unprotected cliff edges along with a small number of signs that provide information on the area along with a sign that designates Loop Head as part of the Wild Atlantic Way (Figure 1.5).

Figure 1.4 Features recorded at Loop Head

Figure 1.5 Features at Loop Head

1.4.3 Hazards

No direct hazards were recorded at Loop Head during the hazard mapping. However, it is noted that there are points on site where there are unprotected cliff edges, which could be deemed as a hazard but were not mapped.

1.5 Visitor Characterisation Survey

The visitor monitoring surveys resulted in a total of 124 visitors (which represent 43 group observations). The site is most popular amongst the Couple group with the dominant mode of transport being car. The average dwell time for the site was 27 minutes; with the following activities undertaken during the survey (listed in order of occurrence rate):

Activity Type
Cycling

Activity Type
Photographing
Dog walking (off lead)
Dog walking (on lead)
Jogging
Picnicking
Sitting
Sprinting

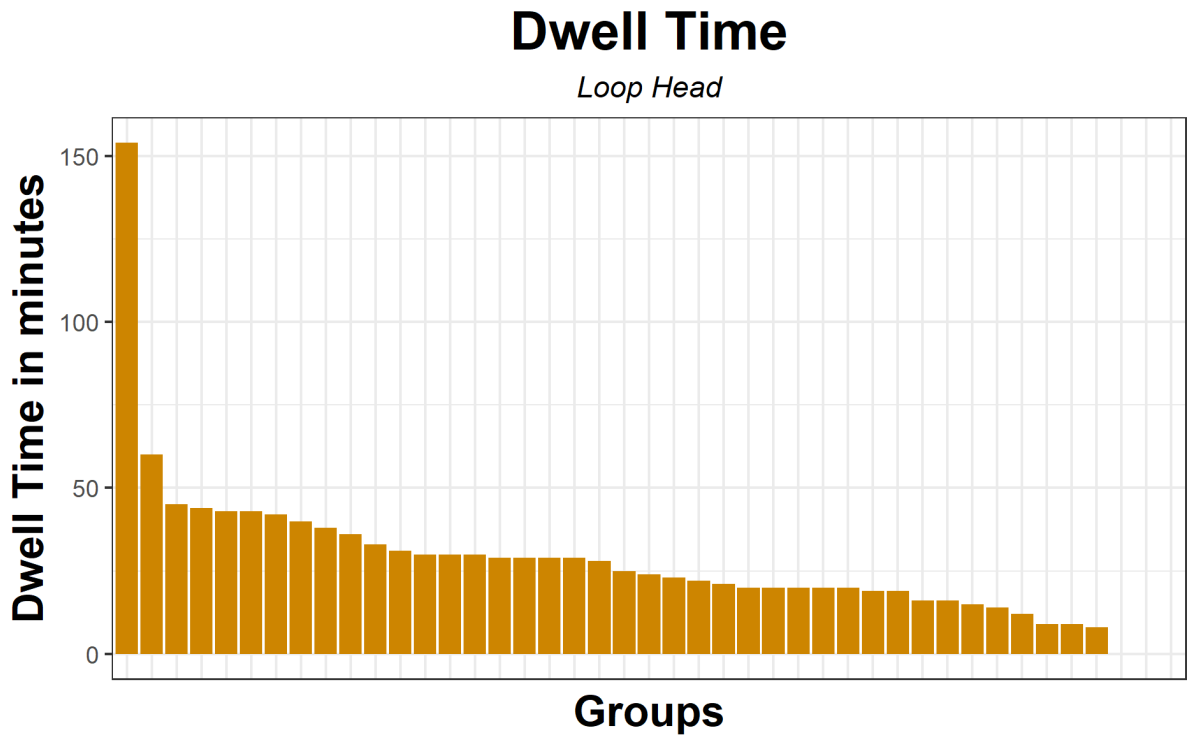


Figure 1.6 Duration of Time Spent at Loop Head

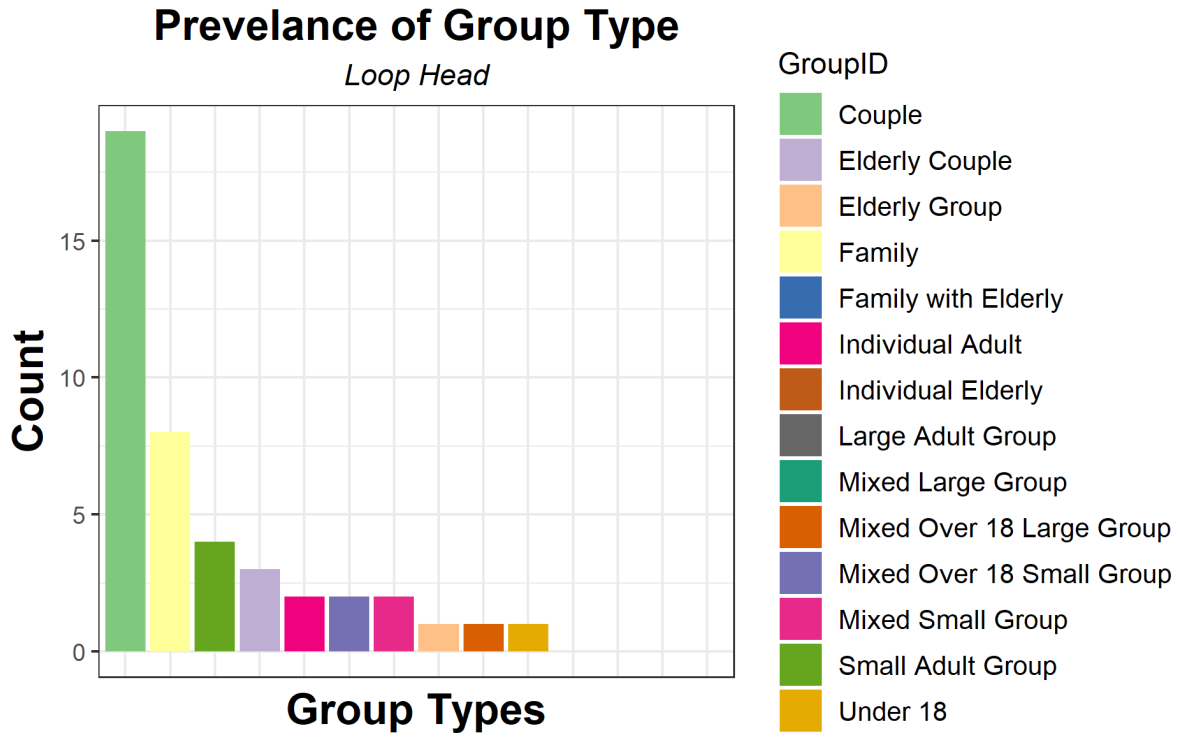


Figure 13.2 Groups of visitors that visited Loop Head

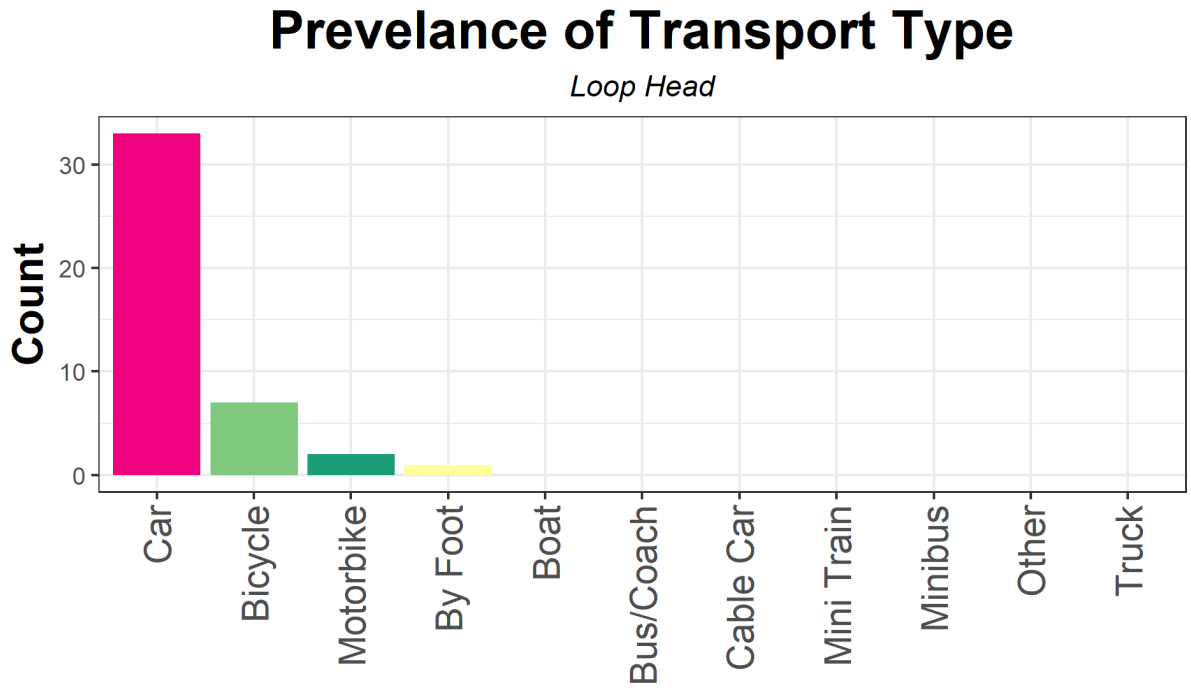


Figure 1.7 Mode of transport used to visit Loop Head

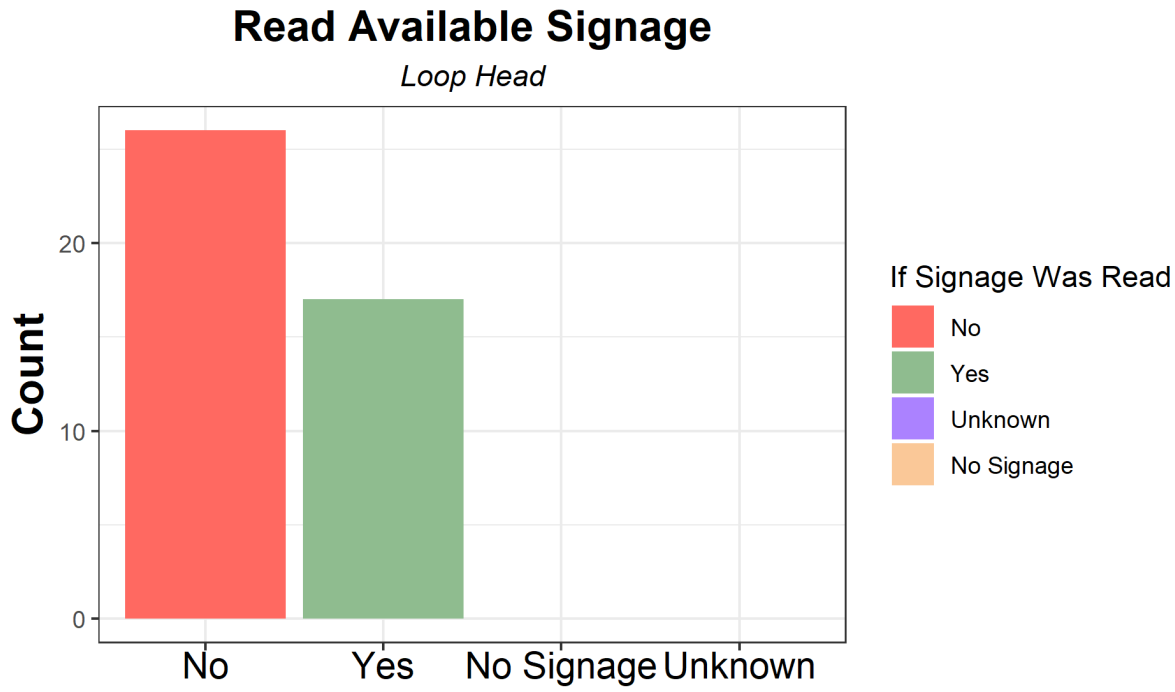


Figure 1.8 Use of Interpretive Material at Loop Head

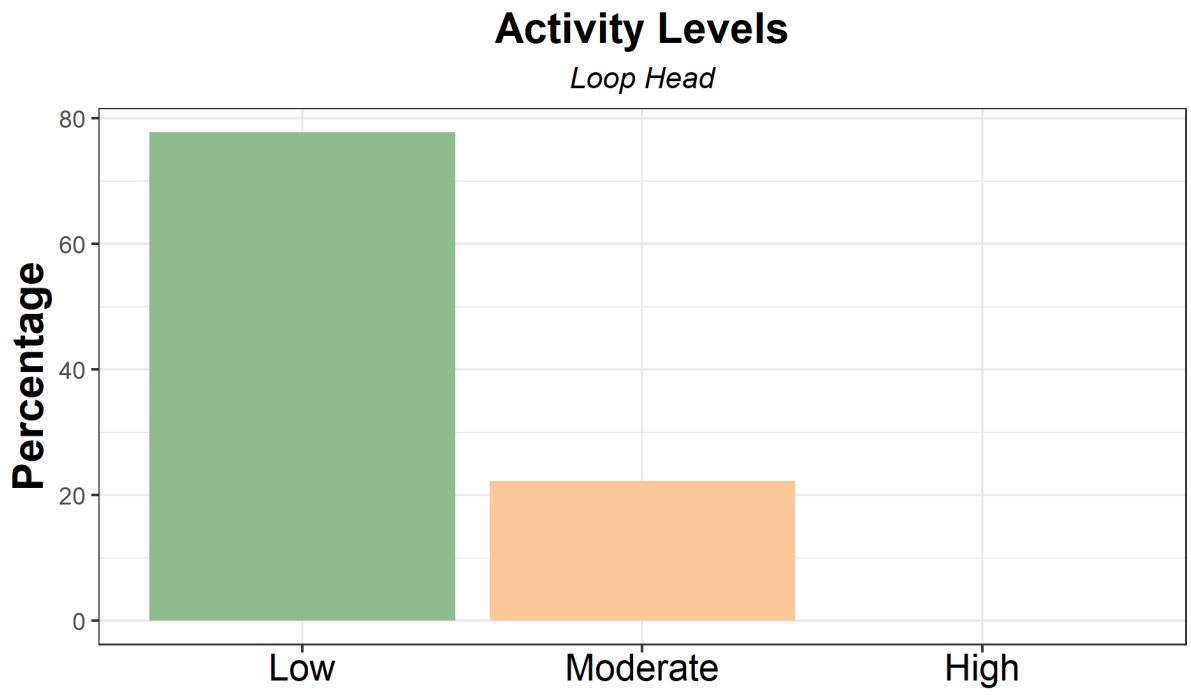


Figure 1.9 Categories of Activity Levels Observed at Loop Head

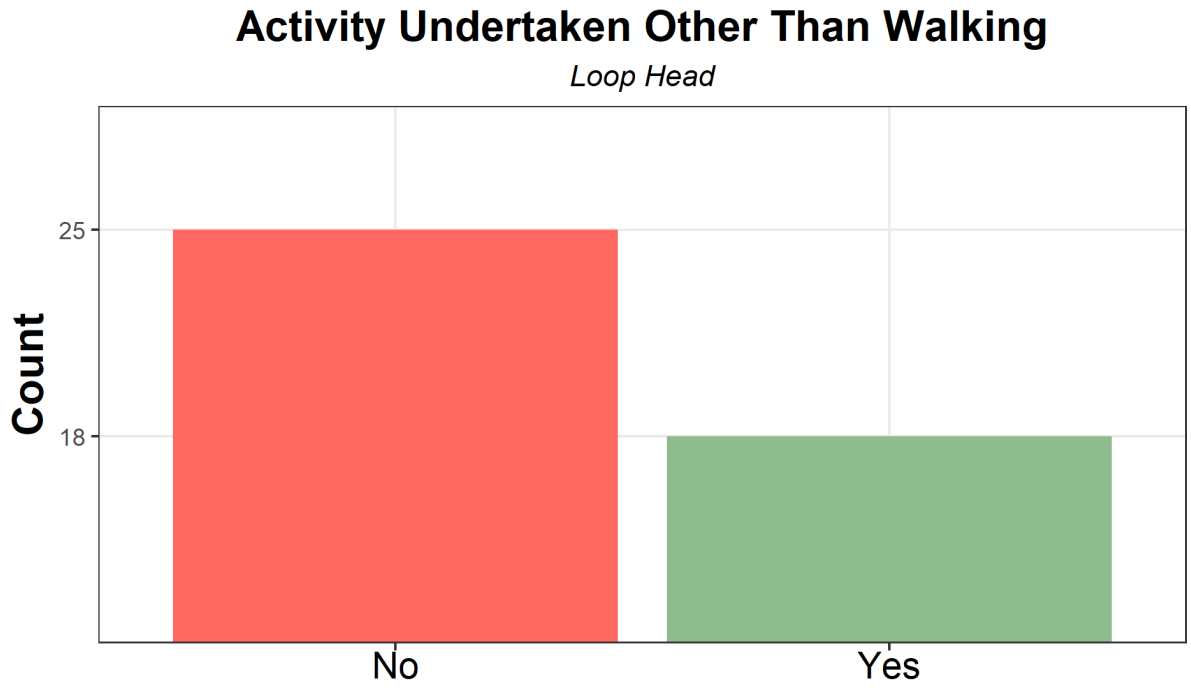


Figure 1.10 Activities undertaken other than walking

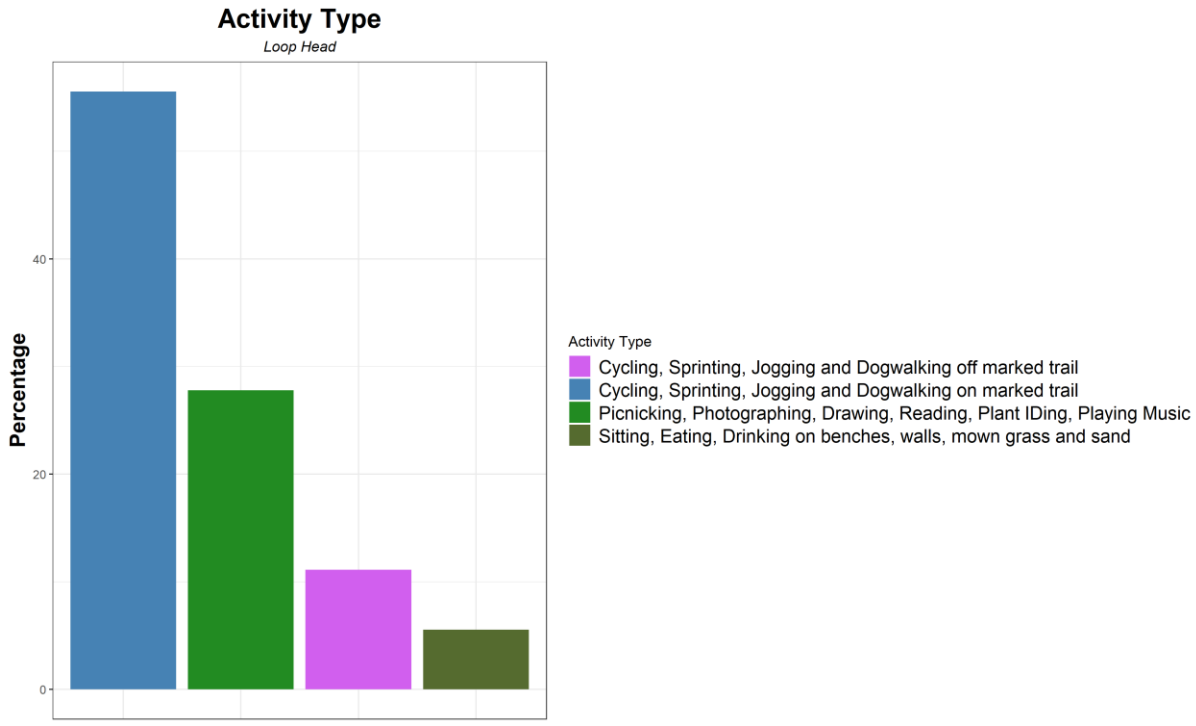


Figure 1.11 Range of Visitor Activities Observed at Loop Head

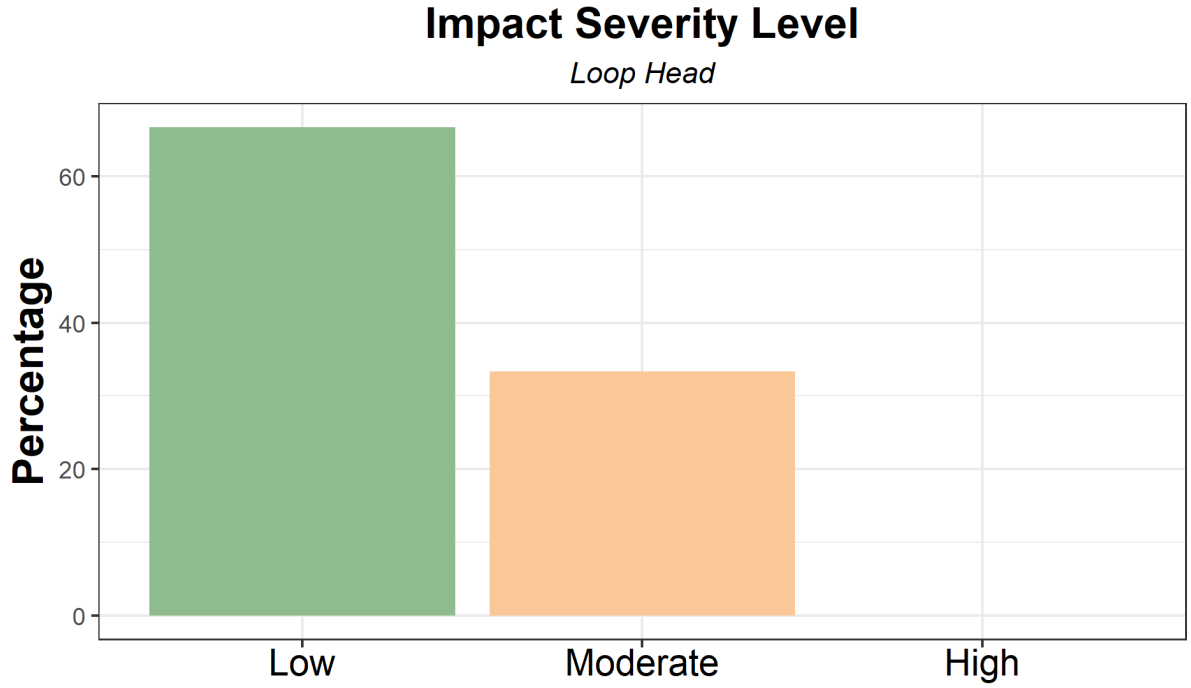


Figure 1.12 Categories of Environmental Impact Levels Observed at Loop Head as a result of Visitor Activities

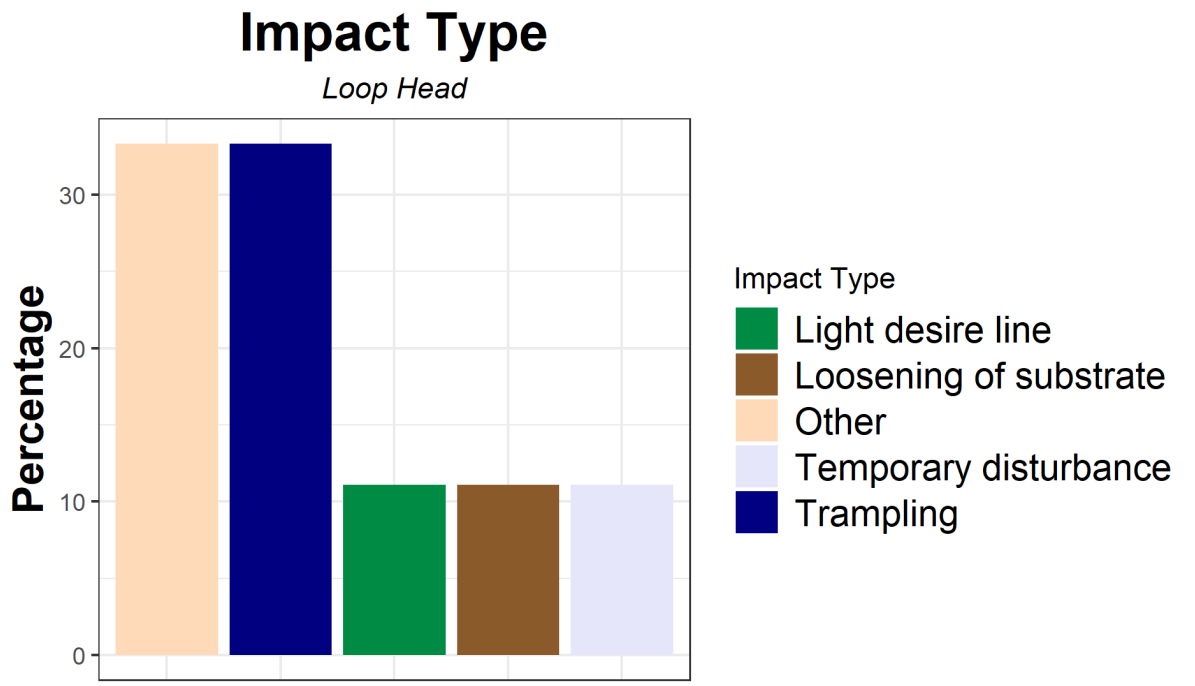


Figure 1.13 Range of Environmental Impacts Observed at Loop Head

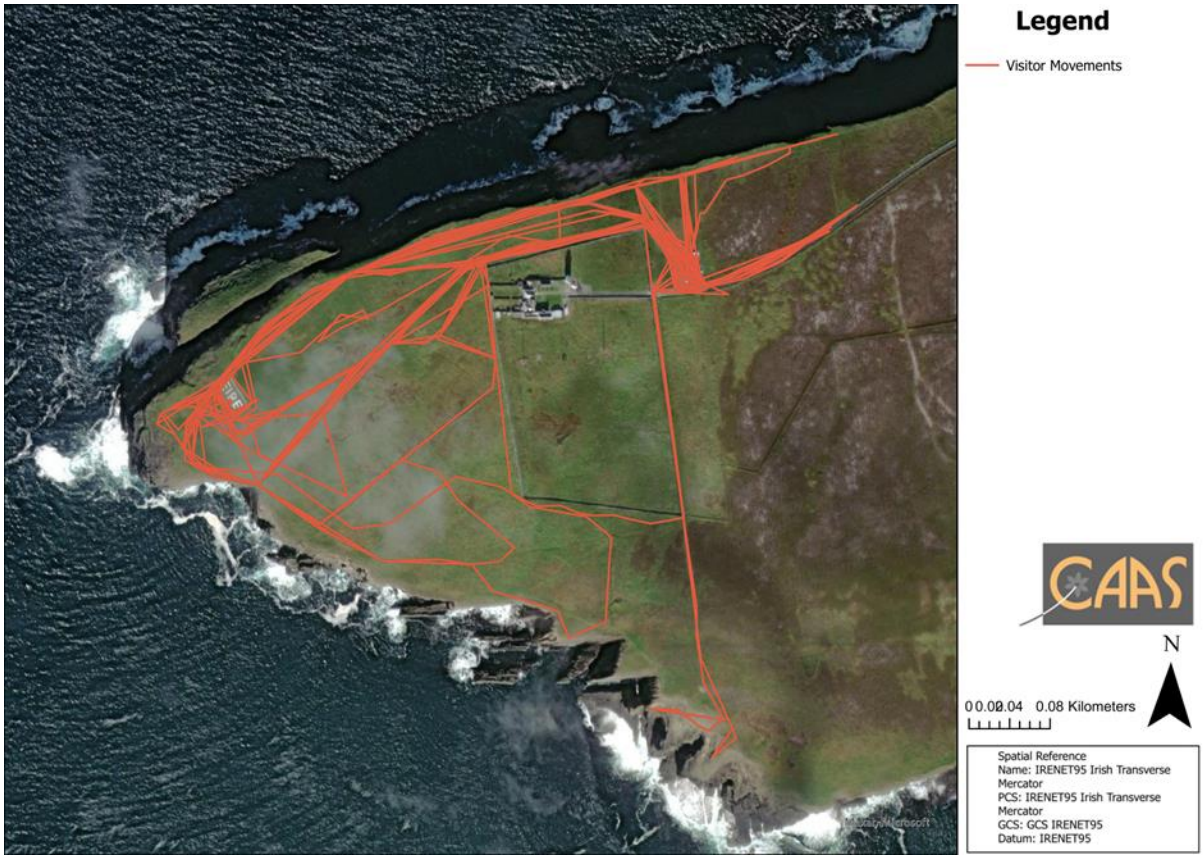


Figure 1.14 Visitor movement patterns at Loop Head

Of the 43 groups recorded on site 42% of them undertook activities other than walking. These activities (identified above) resulted in 9 impacts being observed on site during the survey. Thus, 50% of activities on site resulted in impacts on the environment. The impact severity levels varied with 67% of the impacts being low, 33% of impacts being moderate, and 0% of impacts being high severity. The impacts identified for the site were:

Impact Type	Count
Light desire line	1
Loosening of substrate	1
Other	3
Temporary disturbance	1
Trampling	3

1.6 Ecological Monitoring Results

1.6.1 Ecological Constraints

The species and habitats within 2km of Loop Head are known to be sensitive to aquaculture, pollution, hydrological changes, overgrazing and land use management.

Table 1.1 Designated sites within 2km of Loop Head and relevant ecological receptors

Site Code	Site Name	Distance (km)	Site Type	Qualifying Feature
[000045]	Loop Head pNHA	0.01	pNHA	
[002165]	Lower River Shannon SAC	0.01	SAC	Water courses of plain to montane levels with the *Ranunculion fluitantis* and *Callitricho-Batrachion* vegetation [3260], Atlantic salt meadows *(Glauco-Puccinellietalia maritimae)* [1330], Freshwater pearl mussel *(Margaritifera margaritifera)* [1029], Large shallow inlets and bays [1160], Estuaries [1130], Sea lamprey *(Petromyzon marinus)* [1095], Coastal lagoons [1150], Sandbanks which are slightly covered by sea water all the time [1110], Atlantic salmon *(Salmo salar)* [1106], Bottlenose dolphin *(Tursiops truncatus)* [1349], Otter *(Lutra lutra)* [1355], Reefs [1170], Alluvial forests with *Alnus glutinosa* and *Fraxinus excelsior (Alno-Padion, Alnion incanae, Salicion albae)* [91E0], Mudflats and sandflats not covered by seawater at low tide [1140], Salicornia and other annuals colonising mud and sand [1310], Mediterranean salt meadows *(Juncetalia maritimi)* [1410], River lamprey *(Lampetra fluviatilis)* [1099], Perennial vegetation of stony banks [1220], Brook lamprey *(Lampetra planeri)* [1096], Molinia meadows on calcareous, peaty or clayey-silt-laden soils *(Molinion caeruleae)* [6410], Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic coasts [1230]
[004119]	Loop Head SPA	0.13	SPA	Kittiwake *(Rissa tridactyla)* [A188], Guillemot *(Uria aalge)* [A199]

1.6.2 Habitat Descriptions

The majority of the habitat at Loop is taken up by dry calcareous and neutral grassland (Fossitt Code GS1), which provide ample habitat for the Special Conservation Interest species for which the SPA, Loop Head, is designated to forage. As Loop Head is a coastal area it also contains coastal habitats such as dry siliceous heath (Fossitt Code HH1), which border the dry and calcareous grassland in the area, siliceous scree and loose rock (Fossitt Code ER3) and sea stacks and islets (Fossitt Code CS2), which make up the direct coastal habitat of the area.

There is a disperse and uncontrolled trail network across the site – there is a set of desire lines where visitors track over the site which are forming a network of parallel trails.

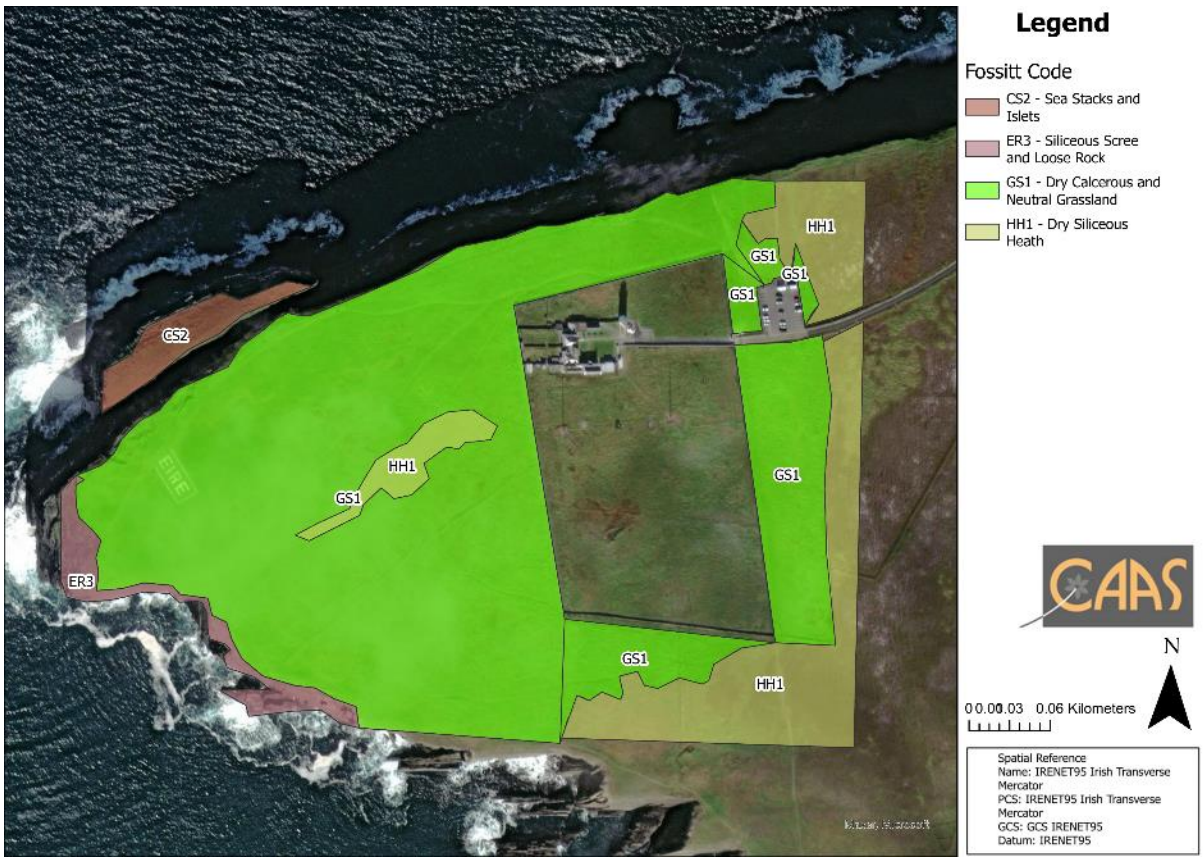


Figure 1.15 Habitats present at Loop Head

1.6.3 Condition Assessment

There are a range of habitats present on site, the assessment of habitat condition identified that the overall habitat quality[2] following the assessment scale was "4" which means the majority of the habitats have a localised negative impact, requiring intervention to allow full recovery. There were 14 recorded incidents of damage to habitats occurring off the marked paths on site. The causes of damage were identified to be walking by visitors.

1.6.4 Mammals on Site

No mammals were recorded on site at Loop Head. Due to the coastal location of Loop Head, the NBDC data shows the overwhelmingly majority of species that were recorded were marine mammals, with an extraordinary large number of grey seals being observed and a large number of bottle-nosed dolphins also being observed. With regard to terrestrial mammals, the NBDC data shows far less species being recorded compared to marine mammals with badgers and hares being the most commonly recorded species.

Table 1.2 List of mammals that have been recorded at NBDC Hectads Q64 &Q74

Taxonomic group	Common name	Scientific name	Record count
Marine mammal	Bottle-nosed Dolphin	*Tursiops truncatus*	110
Marine mammal	Common Dolphin	*Delphinus delphis*	15
Marine mammal	Common Porpoise	*Phocoena phocoena*	14
Marine mammal	Grey Seal	*Halichoerus grypus*	549
Marine mammal	Humpback Whale	*Megaptera novaeangliae*	1
Marine mammal	Minke Whale	*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*	16
Marine mammal	Walrus	*Odobenus rosmarus*	1
Terrestrial mammal	Eurasian Badger	*Meles meles*	19
Terrestrial mammal	European Otter	*Lutra lutra*	1
Terrestrial mammal	Feral Goat	*Capra hircus*	1
Terrestrial mammal	Irish Hare	*Lepus timidus subsp. hibernicus*	5

[2] This value was calculated using the methods set out in Appendix II

Taxonomic group	Common name	Scientific name	Record count
Terrestrial mammal	Red Fox	*Vulpes vulpes*	1
Terrestrial mammal	Soprano Pipistrelle	*Pipistrellus pygmaeus*	1

1.6.5 Wintering Bird Survey

Fulmars and Kittiwakes are the main breeding species on the northern tip of Loop Head and Dermot and Grania's Rock, a sea stack separated from the mainland only by a narrow chasm. A few hundred meters east the cliffs at Bullaunnaleama host colonies of Guillemots, Razorbills, Kittiwakes and a few stray Fulmars. However, there is limited wintering activity at the site.

Table 1.3 Results of the wintering bird survey conducted at Loop Head

Common name	Scientific name	Record count
Herring Gull	*Larus argentatus*	7

Table 1.4 List of wintering birds that have been recorded at NBDC Hectads Q64 & Q74

Taxonomic group	Common name	Scientific name	Record count
Bird	Alcidae	*Alcidae*	5
Bird	American Golden Plover	*Pluvialis dominica*	8
Bird	American Herring Gull	*Larus smithsonianus*	1
Bird	Arctic Skua	*Stercorarius parasiticus*	3
Bird	Arctic Tern	*Sterna paradisaea*	3
Bird	Atlantic Puffin	*Fratercula arctica*	2
Bird	Balearic Shearwater	*Puffinus mauretanicus*	3
Bird	Bar-tailed Godwit	*Limosa lapponica*	1
Bird	Black-headed Gull	*Larus ridibundus*	12
Bird	Black-legged Kittiwake	*Rissa tridactyla*	122
Bird	Black-tailed Godwit	*Limosa limosa*	2
Bird	Black Guillemot	*Cepphus grylle*	2
Bird	Blue-winged Teal	*Anas discors*	1
Bird	Branta hutchinsii	*Branta hutchinsii*	1
Bird	Common Greenshank	*Tringa nebularia*	3
Bird	Common Guillemot	*Uria aalge*	130
Bird	Common Moorhen	*Gallinula chloropus*	4
Bird	Common Redshank	*Tringa totanus*	8
Bird	Common Sandpiper	*Actitis hypoleucos*	5
Bird	Common Scoter	*Melanitta nigra*	4
Bird	Common Shelduck	*Tadorna tadorna*	1
Bird	Common Snipe	*Gallinago gallinago*	15
Bird	Cory's Shearwater	*Calonectris diomedea*	3
Bird	Dunlin	*Calidris alpina*	4
Bird	Eurasian Curlew	*Numenius arquata*	20
Bird	Eurasian Dotterel	*Charadrius morinellus*	5
Bird	Eurasian Oystercatcher	*Haematopus ostralegus*	14
Bird	Eurasian Teal	*Anas crecca*	5
Bird	Eurasian Wigeon	*Anas penelope*	2
Bird	Eurasian Woodcock	*Scolopax rusticola*	3
Bird	European Golden Plover	*Pluvialis apricaria*	8
Bird	European Shag	*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*	26
Bird	European Storm-petrel	*Hydrobates pelagicus*	13
Bird	Fea's Petrel	*Pterodroma feae*	1
Bird	Glaucous Gull	*Larus hyperboreus*	6
Bird	Great Black-backed Gull	*Larus marinus*	36
Bird	Great Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax carbo*	10
Bird	Great Northern Diver	*Gavia immer*	5
Bird	Great Shearwater	*Puffinus gravis*	2
Bird	Great Skua	*Stercorarius skua*	2
Bird	Greater White-fronted Goose	*Anser albifrons*	1

Taxonomic group	Common name	Scientific name	Record count
Bird	Green Sandpiper	*Tringa ochropus*	1
Bird	Grey Heron	*Ardea cinerea*	12
Bird	Grey Plover	*Pluvialis squatarola*	4
Bird	Herring Gull	*Larus argentatus*	31
Bird	Iceland Gull	*Larus glaucoides*	5
Bird	Jack Snipe	*Lymnocryptes minimus*	4
Bird	Kumlien's Iceland Gull	*Larus glaucoides subsp. kumlieni*	1
Bird	Larus	*Larus*	3
Bird	Lesser Black-backed Gull	*Larus fuscus*	21
Bird	Lesser Yellowlegs	*Tringa flavipes*	2
Bird	Little Auk	*Alle alle*	1
Bird	Little Grebe	*Tachybaptus ruficollis*	1
Bird	Little Gull	*Larus minutus*	2
Bird	Long-tailed Duck	*Clangula hyemalis*	1
Bird	Long-tailed Skua	*Stercorarius longicaudus*	1
Bird	Macaronesian Shearwater	*Puffinus baroli*	1
Bird	Mallard	*Anas platyrhynchos*	11
Bird	Manx Shearwater	*Puffinus puffinus*	72
Bird	Mediterranean Gull	*Larus melanocephalus*	5
Bird	Mew Gull	*Larus canus*	11
Bird	Northern Fulmar	*Fulmarus glacialis*	108
Bird	Northern Gannet	*Morus bassanus*	86
Bird	Northern Lapwing	*Vanellus vanellus*	10
Bird	Pied-billed Grebe	*Podilymbus podiceps*	1
Bird	Pink-footed Goose	*Anser brachyrhynchus*	1
Bird	Pomarine Skua	*Stercorarius pomarinus*	2
Bird	Razorbill	*Alca torda*	45
Bird	Red-breasted Merganser	*Mergus serrator*	1
Bird	Red-throated Diver	*Gavia stellata*	2
Bird	Red Knot	*Calidris canutus*	3
Bird	Ringed Plover	*Charadrius hiaticula*	15
Bird	Ruddy Turnstone	*Arenaria interpres*	6
Bird	Sabine's Gull	*Larus sabini*	3
Bird	Sandwich Tern	*Sterna sandvicensis*	3
Bird	Sooty Shearwater	*Puffinus griseus*	5
Bird	Spotted Crake	*Porzana porzana*	3
Bird	Spotted Redshank	*Tringa erythropus*	1
Bird	Spotted Sandpiper	*Actitis macularius*	1
Bird	Twite	*Carduelis flavirostris*	2
Bird	Upland Sandpiper	*Bartramia longicauda*	1
Bird	Water Rail	*Rallus aquaticus*	3
Bird	Whimbrel	*Numenius phaeopus*	2
Bird	Wilson's Phalarope	*Phalaropus tricolor*	1
Bird	Wilson's Storm-petrel	*Oceanites oceanicus*	1

1.7 Recommendations

- Vehicular access to the heathlands beyond the carpark should be managed– there is evidence that the vegetated habitats are used as an overspill carpark which the site is full.
- Trail network management should be explored; trail marking and stabilisation as one option or the use of a dynamic trail management system which could alleviate the pressures which are occurring.
- Habitat management strategies could be developed for the site to increase the floral diversity of the grass and heathland habitats on site.
- Introduce signage with respect to the resident population of breeding guillemots.

Appendix I

Activities		
Category 1 Low Level		
Walking, running or cycling on paths, marked trails or hard surfaces		LA 1
Walking, running, cycling or playing in mown grass, managed grassland or level sand		LA 2
Sitting on benches, walls, mown grass, sand		LA 3
Swimming, sailing, surfing, kayaking in water		LA 4
Resting, reading, looking, picnicking, sightseeing, painting, photographing		LA 5
Vehicular movement on roads and parking areas		LA 6
Watching nature in hedges, woods, streams, pools and intertidal areas		LA 7
Category 2 Medium Level		
Powered movement through water		MA 1
Any movement leaving an existing trail or marked path		MA 2
Any movement leaving a trail through leafy vegetation		MA 3
Any movement leaving a trail through woody vegetation		MA 4
Climbing on walls, loose stones, sand, soil etc.		MA 5
Fishing		MA 6
Category 3 High Level		
Walking through wet/muddy soil		HA 1
Scrambling on steep or loose slopes		HA 2
Off road vehicular movement		HA 3
Disturbance of wildlife		HA 4
Deliberate building or moving or knocking site materials - parts of monuments, walls, stones, sand etc.		HA 5
Picking herbaceous vegetation		HA 6

Appendix I Activity and impact code index used for recording visitor behaviours on site

Category 1 Low Impact		
No identifiable effect		LIE 1
Desire lines or trails visible on grass and leafy vegetation		LIE 2
Temporary disturbance (including chasing and feeding) of insects, fish, amphibian, reptiles, insects, birds and mammals		LIE 3
Temporary change of character - due to the appearance or nature of activities (noise, crowds, etc.)		LIE 4
General/light littering		LIE 5
Category 2 Medium Impact		
Desire lines or tracks visible outside of existing trail or marked path		MIE 1
Trampling of herbaceous vegetation		MIE 2
Damage to woody vegetation		MIE 3
Incidentally moving or knocking site materials - parts of monuments, walls, stones, sand, rooted vegetation, flora, fauna etc.		MIE 4
Addition/alteration of site features, transient emissions, noise		MIE 5
Transient disturbance, emissions, noise		MIE 6
Disturbance of wildlife		MIE 7
Category 3 Severe Impact		
Direct interference with site material - parts of monuments, walls, stones, sand, rooted vegetation, flora, fauna etc.		SIE 1
Removal of material - parts of monuments, walls, stones, sand, rooted vegetation, flora, fauna etc.		SIE 2
Vandalism or graffiti		SIE 3
Destruction of structures, vegetation or fauna		SIE 4
Heavy littering or dumping quantities of waste		SIE 5
Burning materials or lighting a fire		SIE 6
Injuring, killing or taking wildlife		SIE 7

Appendix II

Habitat Condition Assessment Methodology

A rating scale has been designed for this monitoring programme as a standardised, repeatable measurement for assessing habitat condition across all sites[3]. For the purposes of this monitoring programme, habitat condition is assessed at every site by the surveyor examining four core criteria:

1. The extent to which habitat degradation (due to human activity), if any, is observed;
2. If habitat degradation is observed, the degree to which the impact is localised or widespread;
3. The potential ability for the habitat to recover (related to scale of degradation); and,
4. The requirement for intervention (related to the degree of the previous 3 elements).

For these assessments the term 'degradation' is taken to mean any change that reduces the long-term viability habitats and its qualifying interests [flora and fauna]. Degradation can include readily visible evidence of factors such as surface erosion or compaction, vegetation loss, crowd disturbance [noise], disturbance by pets, littering, burning or pollution.

Based on these four criteria, each site is walked along transects established by the principal pathways that are used for visitor access and movement through each site. At 100 metres intervals along the selected pathways, an assessment of habitat condition is made, using an established rating scale of 1 to 5; 1 being no impact and 5 being high impact. Each rating is then translated into a condition assessment, as displayed in Table II - 1 below.

These ratings are gathered for each site, and are then grouped; from which the mode is taken (i.e., the rating that occurs most frequently. This then recorded and reported as the resultant overall rating of the assessed habitat condition assessment for each site.

Table II-1 Habitat rating scale and condition assessment

Scale	Condition
1	No evidence of any habitat degradation observed.
2	Localised habitat degradation, but slight and capable of rapid recovery.
3	Widespread habitat degradation, but slight and capable of rapid recovery.
4	Localised habitat degradation, requiring intervention to allow full recovery.
5	Widespread habitat degradation, requiring intervention to allow full recovery.

[3] Note: Where possible, the same surveyor is used across multiple sites – but in some instances, different surveyors survey different sites. This can lead to a human variation in the assigning of the rating scale for impact. However, there will be sufficient repetition of the data through the several years of the monitoring programme to account for any variations in human interpretation on this scale.