



Kelp on the shore of Loch Airlort in Scotland

# Site for shore eyes

**Mike Levy** talks to the teacher who's determined to bring the sea to school

**M**asefield's famous poem declared, "We must go down to the sea again", but the sad reality is that school field trips to the UK's unique shorelines are becoming ever more rare.

The reasons, according to Gary Skinner, head of biology at Bedales school in Hampshire, are health and safety concerns about field work, restricted budgets and ever-tighter curriculum time.

Biology field work depends on the seasons, and summer — when most species and examples can be seen — is the busiest term in the school year. The result, he says, is a sharp decline in such field work.

Mr Skinner finds this situation so worrying that he has come up with his own unique solution: a virtual rocky shore tour designed

for A-level students which other schools can use free of charge.

Mr Skinner is a member of the British Ecological Society (BES), who sponsor the site which he designed from scratch.

"I am a keen ecologist and this site started with my love of digital photography," he says. "I was impressed by the quality of pictures and the fact you see them filling an entire monitor screen."

The site has wide-view, scrollable images of various wild shorelines. Red "hotspots" allow users to zoom into various features on the shore. There is a field guide with information about lichens, seaweeds and so on, plus hints for teachers and students about field work projects. There is also a range of background information on global shoreline ecology.

"The BES gave me some money to travel to Scotland and the west of Ireland where I took lots of photographs of rocky shores in different settings," says Mr Skinner. "The website allows students to see what I saw — without leaving their desks."

Mr Skinner points out that the

site is no substitute for the real thing, but it is useful for schools that are unable to visit the coast. He recently received a call from a school in Derbyshire that had applied some ecological survey techniques to nearby moorland then went on the rocky shores site to apply the same methods there.

The most innovative idea on his site is the virtual "quadrats" — a grid of 50cm x 50cm used to study a habitat. The site has quadrats from various shorelines around the British Isles and can viewed in actual size. As the downloads are large, Mr Skinner recommends viewing the site in broadband.

"It is also useful tool for preparing students who are about to go on a field trip; I don't think there's anything else out there like it," says Debbie Smith, education officer for the BES.

Mr Skinner is keen to expand his site to include other habitats, such as sand dunes. He is also hoping to use his forthcoming sabbatical from the school to take his camera further afield.

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