

The 2008 Irish Coastal Network (ICoNet) conference was jointly organised with the Northern Ireland Coastal and Marine Forum (NICMF), and took place in Derry on April 10th and 11th. The theme of the conference – ***Planning Challenges and Opportunities for Ireland's Coast*** – is appropriate in the context of current and predicted pressures facing Ireland's and Europe's coastline. The conference focused on a range of topical coastal and marine issues relevant to planning and management, sessions were devoted to: coastal and marine planning across the island of Ireland; emerging economic sectors; spatial planning and coastal development; and, the role of seabed data in support of coastal policy.

Conference speakers were drawn from academia and research, industry and statutory agencies; the keynote address was delivered by Dr. Peter Heffernan, CEO of Ireland's Marine Institute. Conference presentations examined aspects of planning from the European through to local scale. Nicole Schaefer of the European Commission's Maritime Policy Task Force provided a comprehensive overview of the *Integrated Maritime Policy for Europe* and the implications for coastal and marine planning in Member States. Prof. Andrew Cooper (Chair of NICMF) provided input from a more local perspective; examining the support role that coastal fora and partnerships can provide to statutory coastal management and planning.



Figure 1. Nicole Schaefer (left) of the European Commission's Maritime Policy Task Force, and Ken Bradley (right) of the Department of Environment Northern Ireland, addressing the ICoNet / NICMF conference audience in Derry.

The conference programme comprised analysis of planning from a range of sectoral activities – challenges and opportunities were outlined for: aquaculture; energy; commercial ports; conservation; aggregate extraction; and, archaeology. The importance of having appropriate data at the appropriate scale was a recurrent theme across sectors. Researchers, practitioners and policy-makers need to work within a coherent framework in order to best deliver on meeting information needs and policy obligations. The conference was timely in the context of the recently launched *Integrated Maritime Policy for Europe* and forthcoming UK Marine Bill, both of which make explicit reference to marine spatial planning. Such policy and legislative instruments are likely to generate further debate on the shape and role of marine spatial planning, thus this conference provided an ideal opportunity to discuss how MSP might evolve in Ireland.