



HOLLAND'S OWN GHOSTBUSTERS

AN UNWELCOME ARRIVAL ON ONE OF THE UK'S most popular diveable wrecks, the *Scylla*, is my cue to raise the subject of ghostfishing.

Ghostfishing is what happens when lost or discarded fishing gear, in this case a massive snagged trawl-net, no longer fulfils its function for its owner, but continues uselessly catching fish and other marine life anyway.

Of course, it also threatens any diver who strays too close, and in restricted visibility on a Channel wreck, straying close is all too easy.

To their great credit, a group of Dutch diving volunteers have made it their business to tackle such problems off their shores.

The ambitiously named "Dive the North Sea Clean" initiative was started in 2009 by Ben Stiefelhagen, owner of marine-safety training centre Get Wet Maritiem of Scheveningen. It involves the cleaning and monitoring as well as the exploring of shipwrecks off the Netherlands coast.

A core team of eight is assisted by 100 volunteers. Fifty or so divers are considered suitably qualified for the task of actually clearing nets, lines, hooks and lead from the wrecks. The teams also work to free trapped crustaceans as well as the occasional porpoise or seal.

But they go further – they engage fishermen and anglers in discussions about less damaging ways of fishing, such as use of degradable lines and nets, or cast iron to replace lead.

Rather than treat them as the enemy, they try to establish a rapport. As a result, fishermen now let them know when they snag a net, in the hope that they might be able to help them retrieve it.

The divers talk to businesses, schools and dive clubs about sustainability, and seek sponsorship. Last year a large donation from the Netherlands' national lottery helped the group expand its activities. Of course, they're part-time volunteers and they like to wreck-dive for fun as well.

As far as I know there is no such co-ordinated initiative on this side of the water, although a pressing problem such as the *Scylla* will no doubt be sorted out by the stakeholders – Plymouth dive operators whose business includes taking divers out to the wreck.

Long before the season starts (as traditionally heralded by Easter and mass kitting-up exercises at the London International Dive Show) this particular issue will no doubt have been resolved. But ghostfishing will continue to pose a threat to UK divers and marine life.

As you will have realised the moment you considered rushing off to emulate the Dutch group, tackling ghostfishing can be dangerous work, even for experienced divers. Imagine a wreck like the *Scylla* draped in some 75m of tough netting – you have to know exactly what you're doing.

The Dutch group expects its divers to be well versed in coldwater diving conditions and the use of cutters, knives and lifting bags at depths of 30m or more. They must carry at least a 10-litre nitrox twin-set, and are required to work in buddy-pairs of divers who know each other well.

It's certainly diving for a purpose. Could it happen here?

THEY FREE TRAPPED CRUSTACEANS AS WELL AS THE OCCASIONAL PORPOISE OR SEAL