

March, 2013

Collaboration with Irish Aquarium Establishes SHU as a Member of the International Coastal Research Community

John Rapaglia, *Sacred Heart University*

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News Story: March 11, 2013

Sacred Heart University is now one of the few universities in the world to have an international coastal research center capable of learning not only how to better protect fish and shellfish from pollutants like those found in Long Island Sound, but possibly how to use tides as an energy source.

Collaborating with scientists and staff at the [Dingle Oceanworld Aquarium](#) in Dingle, Ireland, Sacred Heart [Biology Department](#) faculty will soon start offering advanced marine biology classes for both undergraduate and graduate students. The first class in Dingle will take place in May and, like many future classes, be taught collaboratively by Sacred Heart faculty and marine biology experts from the Oceanworld Aquarium.

Once the Dingle marine biology program is fully up and running, Sacred Heart students will have the opportunity to enroll in both semester-long and shorter intersession courses, said [John Rapaglia](#), who is coordinating the program with fellow Sacred Heart assistant biology professor [Mark Beekey](#). Students pursuing an interdisciplinary Environmental Systems Analysis and Management master's degree will also have the option of performing all or part of their thesis field work there.

"Many people associate marine biology with the study of mammals like dolphins and fish like sharks and, although these subjects are important, the field is so much more," Rapaglia said. "Marine scientists study and try to solve problems associated with the rise in sea level, coastal plants and wildlife and, as so many people here in Connecticut can relate to, issues around coastal erosion and weather disasters like Hurricane Sandy that so severely impact the coastal zone."

Students will be able to take advantage of the aquarium's advanced research and learning facilities, and the high-level research projects performed in Dingle will benefit both institutions, Rapaglia said, as well as the Irish fishing industry.

“Very few primarily undergraduate institutions have as strong a coastal focus as Sacred Heart does, which is only enhanced by our proximity to Long Island Sound,” Rapaglia noted. “Dingle Harbor’s semi-rural to rural location creates a nice juxtaposition to the highly urbanized Long Island Sound.”

This new Coastal Study Centre will also only strengthen Sacred Heart’s Irish and Celtic [study abroad](#) program. Sacred Heart has a [vibrant campus in Dingle](#), where undergraduate students majoring or minoring in [Irish Studies](#) can take two-week or semester-long classes focused on Irish and Celtic history, culture, language, literature, media studies, business, health professions, music, politics, religion and society. A course in education will be added in January 2014.

Rapaglia said he and Beekey are also considering ways the Dingle Coastal Study Centre can expand the Sacred Heart Biology Department’s marine conservation efforts, which in Connecticut focus on tagging, data-gathering, increasing public awareness about and ultimately saving the Long Island Horseshoe Crab. They do this through a program called [Project Limulus](#) that is co-directed by Beekey and Associate Professor [Jennifer Mattei](#), who also directs the Environmental Systems Analysis & Management master’s program. Internationally recognized, Project *Limulus*’ funders include The Disney Worldwide Conservation Fund.

Long-term plans for the Sacred Heart-Dingle collaboration include developing student internships, establishing a permanent biological monitoring station and creating opportunities for faculty research in related disciplines.

“Developing this kind of teaching facility in an area with as rich a coastal area as Dingle is such a unique and exciting opportunity,” Rapaglia said. “Sacred Heart’s biology program has a strong niche of faculty focused on marine biology and coastal research, so the growth opportunities—and ways our students’ work can enhance the environment—are huge.”