

***Mertensia maritima* (Oysterplant) in the Outer Hebrides**

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Mertensia maritima (Oysterplant) is a species of sea shores, widely distributed round the northern parts of Britain and Ireland. Because seashores are dynamic habitats affected by storms it tends to have transient populations and to emerge from buried or washed up seed. In some parts of Britain it is relatively frequent, so there are often good local seed sources nearby which can help a population re-establish if it gets washed away. In the Outer Hebrides, however, it has always been quite a rare plant.

Historical records

The first report was made by James Robertson between 1776 and 1771 (Henderson & Dickson 1994, p206), but his reports and diaries of this excursion are lost, so it appears only in a list for the Long Island, without a locality. Since then it has been known from five different locations as populations which have survived for some period before succumbing, and these are summarised in Table 1.

Locality	Records	Recorder(s)
near Stornoway	1901	MacArthur
Stockay, Monach Isles NF660631	1949, 1969, 1986	Franklyn Perring, Roland Randall
Gearraidh a' Siar/Culla Bay, Benbecula NF756535/NF757534 and NF761536	1979, 1983, 1985, 1986, 1987	Richard Pankhurst, A Henderson, Jackie Muscott, NE Buxton, Nick Stewart, Roland Randall, John Bratton
Baleshare NF773620	1971	AM Mackenzie, CW Murray
Vatersay	no details	

Table 1: Summary of localised historical records of *Mertensia maritima* in the Outer Hebrides.

The most recent records have been from the Stockay in the Monach Isles, but it was lost from here either before or during the large storm of January 2005, which substantially reduced the area of the island. A more accessible site on the south side of Culla Bay, Benbecula was recorded regularly during the 1980s, but the last records here were in 1987, about the same time as the last record from Stockay.

These records have minimal information about the size of the *Mertensia* populations, but Pankhurst & Mullin (1991) say that the Culla Bay site had “one large plant and several seedlings”, and there is a slide in the Natural History Museum (Fig. 1), which however gives no impression of the habitat or extent. There is also a photo from Stockay taken by Roland Randall in Hepburn (1977). It shows a single plant on a sandy beach with pebbles, but there is no information on whether there were more plants. Nevertheless, it seems that *Mertensia* populations, at least in recent times, have not been large.

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Fig. 1: *Mertensia maritima* photographed at Culla Bay in 1983 by Richard Pankhurst. © Natural History Museum.

Recent finds

Against this background PAS was excited to hear in 2021 that PH had discovered a new site for *Mertensia* on Benbecula – in fact not too far from the previous site, but on the other side of Culla Bay. But it was only this year that PAS and SD managed to survey the locality (Fig. 2). There is a population of 10 plants, some joining up in larger patches (Fig. 3a), some large, and several seedlings (Fig. 3b) on shingle at Geòdha Bàn. The main area is at NF75885495, but extending to NF75865500. This is an area of

shingle with quite large pebbles, somewhat protected by rocks. The plants are sufficiently large that they must have been here for some years. It is possible that they all originated from a single original germination. With a seed source here it would not be very surprising if *Mertensia* reappeared on the south side of Culla Bay, but PH has looked and there is no sign of it (yet).



Fig. 2: (left) Habitat of *Mertensia maritima* at Geòdha Bàn; (right) flowering stem. Photos: Paul Smith.

This new population is a very interesting development in the Outer Hebrides flora by itself, but independently Ben Morton-Clark, a seasonal ranger, found a further plant at Trèseabhaig on Watersay at NL62129582, on flattish ground just above the storm-beach (Fig. 4). It would be a considerable coincidence if after more than thirty years *Mertensia* colonised independently in two separate places, so perhaps the availability of a local seed source on Benbecula has given rise to this new find. But there is a long distance between them. But the existence of a previous record from Watersay may indicate that it is a place where seeds of this type become stranded.

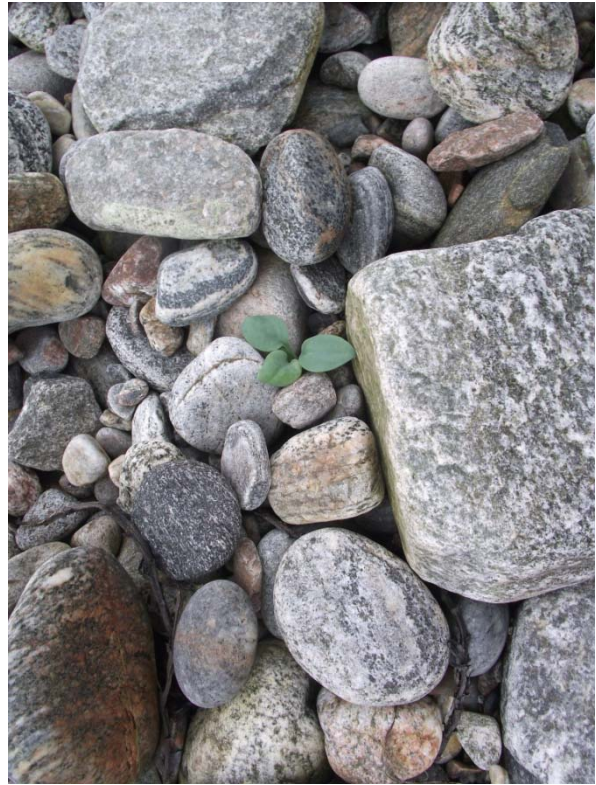


Fig. 3: (left) two *Mertensia* plants forming a large patch; (right) a seedling. Photos: Paul Smith.

Perhaps this heralds a period when *Mertensia* will colonise suitable places in the Outer Hebrides. It is susceptible to grazing (Doody & Randall 2003, p39 shows cattle grazing *Mertensia*), so only likely to persist where the shingle is rough enough to deter grazing animals. But it would be worth looking out for anywhere round the coast.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Ben Morton-Clark for the details of the Vatersay record, and John Hunnex (Natural History Museum) for doing the detective work to track down the slide in the BM collections. Fig. 1 is reproduced by kind permission of the Natural History Museum.



Fig. 3: *Mertensia* at Trèseabhaig on Vatersay. Photo: Ben Morton-Clark.

References

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