

Ed steps up for last cha-cha chance

James Gillespie

ED BALLS, the surprise hit of this year's Strictly Come Dancing, stepped up to a cha-cha-cha challenge last night in an attempt to stay in the contest.

All the dancers delivered an individual routine — Balls performed a tango to (I Can't Get No) Satisfaction with partner Katya Jones — and then returned to the dancefloor for the cha-cha-cha.

The former shadow chancellor has delighted fans with his performances to Gangnam Style and Great Balls of Fire, but he has to rely on public votes to keep him on the show. The judges are not impressed. Balls is favourite to go out in tonight's results show.



Ed Balls prepares for last night's show where he was to dance the tango and the cha-cha-cha. He may face elimination tonight

Seals under threat from tidal projects

Julia Horton

NEW research has suggested that Scotland's fastest tidal races act like a sushi bar for seals that are hunting fish, raising fears that wildlife is on a deadly collision course with some of the world's biggest marine energy projects.

Harbour seals are known to feed over a wide area of sea, habitually spending several days at a time miles offshore feeding.

Experts at St Andrews University's Sea Mammal Research Unit (SMRU) and the Scottish Association for Marine Science

were surprised to find what they dubbed "probably" the greatest known density of foraging harbour seals on the planet in the Kyle Rhea channel between Skye and the mainland.

Researchers believe that the mammals have learnt that the currents in the channel — which had been earmarked for a tidal scheme — act like a sushi bar or conveyor belt by shunting mackerel through, providing an easy meal for seals.

The study, part-funded by the Scottish government, suggests that there is a greater chance than previously thought that seals could be maimed or killed by the giant blades of tidal schemes being built around Scotland.

Gordon Hastie, lead author at SMRU, said: "To find effectively all the seals here foraging in the same, small place is unusual.

"They spent most of their time foraging within a very small part of the narrow tidal channel — about 1km square — with the fastest currents. This has created what we believe is probably the highest known density of foraging harbour seals anywhere in the world.

"We believe that this is driven by shoals of mackerel, which are being funnelled through the narrow channel on a 'tidal conveyor belt' during the summer months, creating an unusual foraging opportunity for seals."

He warned that if the fast currents at such sites attracted "high numbers" of seals as well as tidal power developers there was "certainly the potential" for fatal collisions with fast-moving rotating blades.

The first turbine in what is set to be the world's biggest tidal scheme, began generating power this month in the Pentland Firth. Conservationists warned that harbour seal populations had already suffered "dramatic declines" since 2000, prior to construction.

Conservationists said the "vital" new study showed the need to monitor the impact on marine mammals of schemes such as MeyGen, which will have nearly 300 turbines when completed and is expected to power about 175,000 homes.

Urging ministers to "take careful account" of such studies before approving any

ongoing project now funded by the Natural Environment Research Council to improve understanding of how wildlife uses tides to help assess the likely impact of marine energy schemes.

Atlantis Resources, the company behind MeyGen, said one of the reasons it abandoned its proposed tidal scheme at Kyle Rhea was the high number of seals. A spokesman said the Pentland array involved a wider channel, and had undergone a "thorough environmental impact assessment".

The Scottish government said Marine Scotland was working with MeyGen and the SMRU to observe "interactions" between turbines and marine mammals.

Findings would provide "valuable data" to help inform future planning decisions.

Researcher Sarah Dolman, of Whale and Dolphin Conservation, said: "This is novel technology [and only a few turbines are set to be monitored but] . . . the impacts might be magnified as the [number of] turbines increase — if animals can't swim around the device, because there is another one beside it."

Researchers observed harbour seals in and around the Kyle Rhea channel in 2012 and 2013. More than 100 of the mammals were spotted at peak times. Researchers also tagged 19 seals with GPS devices.

While all the tagged animals foraged outside the channel, 15 (79%) spent more than 50% of their time within the channel.

The paper, published in next month's edition of the journal Behavioural Ecology and Sociobiology, is part of an



THE CURRENTS ACT LIKE A SUSHI BAR, SHUNTING MACKEREL

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