



# A New World Class Player in Marine Information

HR Wallingford has recently purchased SeaZone Solutions Ltd. GeoConnexion met SeaZone's new Group Manager, Keiran Millard and Alison Smith, Marketing Manager to talk about the rationale behind the acquisition and the exciting developments that SeaZone will be undertaking with HR Wallingford's support and investment.

Initially we discussed what attracted HR Wallingford to purchase SeaZone. An obvious aspect is the winning combination of two organisations that are well established in similar markets. Both organisations provide expertise in marine sciences, GIS and data use delivered to customers through different but complementary disciplines.

"At HR Wallingford" said Keiran "we provide bespoke analysis and advice for customers using a wide range of data whilst SeaZone delivers a portfolio of geographic information products and services. We wanted to expand our business into other areas and at the time of considering business diversification, the opportunity of a strategic partnership with SeaZone arose. Purchasing the company in its entirety seemed a better proposition for HR Wallingford and SeaZone."

GeoConnexion understood this was a very interesting opportunity particularly given that HR Wallingford, as one of SeaZone's longstanding customers is very familiar with its products and business development. Of course with over 200 staff, the Oxfordshire based company is a lot larger, but SeaZone established in 2004, has seen rapid growth over the last six years, now with over 800 UK and overseas customers. HR Wallingford's 60 year track record and outstanding reputation in the market provides SeaZone customers' with added confidence in its long term future and growth.

"In addition to that" intervened Keiran "our philosophies are very similar. HR Wallingford is a private company limited by guarantee. We have the status of a research association, which means that although commercially oriented the profit made is reinvested into the business again, for the benefits of the whole industry. Such knowledge transfer is part of our business operations."

"From SeaZone's perspective" stepped in Alison "we have always had a strong ethos of promoting the adoption of best practice in the collection, management, access and use of data and information across the public and private sectors, and are actively involved in various national and international initiatives and projects such as DNF, MEDIN and INSPIRE\* to advance these aims. Our philosophies fit very well with HR Wallingford, with both organisations ultimately aiming to improve things for the marketplace. So there is a real synergy between us"

Talking more about the collaborative aspects of this integration, GeoConnexion asked about the potential overlaps as both companies work in the same industry and possibly use the same type of data.

"It is true there is an overlap in this sense" commented Keiran "however the distinction is that at HR Wallingford datasets are used to deliver interpretation or advice to a specific client or for a particular piece of research, whereas, at SeaZone the data is brought in at a very different scale, re-engineered and delivered as value added products for the wider market."

Inevitably, we then talked about relocation and branding. Keiran stated that SeaZone will be relocated from Bentley in Hampshire to Howbery Park in South Oxfordshire where HR Wallingford is based.

"This will give us the scope for expansion, with SeaZone still maintaining its brand and operation of its sales capability, support and product development life cycle. The difference will be that SeaZone will be part of a larger company with additional support and investment opportunities, allowing increased focus on market, products and services development".

Alison explained that after all, the SeaZone brand is very strong in the market place and thus it is very important to maintain and continue to strengthen that position.

## HR Wallingford

The company consists of a Managing Director and a number of trading groups that represent different areas: flood, water, coasts and estuaries, dredging etc. with SeaZone becoming another trading group. The company has previous experience in business acquisition, with the purchase of Dredging Research Ltd. SeaZone however, is the largest acquisition undertaken to date.

HR Wallingford was created as the Hydraulics Research Station of the UK Government in 1947 and became a private entity in 1982. HRW have since operated as an independent, non-profit distributing organisation providing world-leading analysis, advice and support in engineering and environmental hydraulics, and the management of water and the water environment.

This new relationship and a move to Howbery Park in Wallingford, Oxfordshire, will allow both HR Wallingford and SeaZone to draw upon a wider pool of knowledge and expertise bringing wider choice and benefits to both sets of clients and the wider market.

\* DNF – Digital National Framework  
MEDIN – Marine Environmental Data & Information Network  
INSPIRE – Infrastructure for Spatial Information in the European Community

“But in this exercise, GeoConnexion asked, where can we see the common denominator, what is the unifying factor?”

“I think that the unification is the aspect below the surface; the branding and the marketing is what the customer will see: stronger products, more diversified service offering and these will all come from SeaZone.” replied Keiran.

“Even operating as part of a bigger umbrella company” Alison underlined “SeaZone will still retain HR Wallingford as a customer. HR Wallingford will be treated the same as all other SeaZone customers receiving the same terms and levels of service and confidentiality.”

Keiran added “We adopted a similar approach when Wallingford Software (now MWH Soft) was part of HR Wallingford. Wallingford Software supplied products to the whole market and HR Wallingford was simply another customer”

Talking about the vision for the future we then discussed the advantages and improvements that the customers could expect to see.

“It certainly is an exciting time for SeaZone with new opportunities to expand the business and improve its products and serviced delivery. We are looking closely at our delivery mechanisms to make the supply of products to our customers more accessible and efficient, whilst investigating possible new channels and partnerships.” comments Alison.

Ultimately the vision for the future comes down to the core SeaZone mission which is about the delivery of the definitive reference model for the marine environment.

“In this context, for our core product Hydrospatial, the richer we can make its available content the better!” Keiran explained.

“Whilst continuing with the development plan already in place for HydroSpatial improving structure and existing content, we are also looking at additional data layers. For example numerical modelling of ocean currents, temperature and salinity can be developed into products that can then be part of the HydroSpatial family for both present and future forecasting e.g. a temperature layer, predicting the temperature in fifty years time.”

“The problem we are facing today” he added “is that analysis delivered in reports cannot often be used – and reused - for direct decision making. So the benefit of putting the output of the analysis into a product such as Hydrospatial is enormous and can contribute a great deal in planning and informing debate.”

We then talked about the issue of Open Data and how licences, prices and harmonisation are seen after the acquisition.

“We have to sublicense data from various government departments”

explained Keiran “therefore if we did not have to pay the royalties and the administration costs associated with them, these savings would be passed on to our customers. Pricing would more accurately reflect the value added elements of SeaZone products.”

What about, for example, the other Countries around the North Sea? They all have royalty policies do they not?

“Each country is different, so part of the added value that people get from our products is not only the integrated data but also the integrated terms and conditions! SeaZone has a growing international customer base and continues to invest in its Global Mapping Improvement Programme to secure agreements with overseas Hydrographic Offices and other source suppliers to provide fit for purpose products and services ensuring the widest possible use and added value of marine geographic information.” replied Alison.

HR Wallingford is well placed to assist with these expansion plans having an established global reach, including offices in Asia, Australia, USA, India, Italy and the Middle East. This provides established channels for SeaZone to promote and deliver its products and services overseas.

“Of course” added Keiran “we have the INSPIRE Directive, which is now law across EU Member States. It is the legal driver for how governments will share and re-use geospatial data and act as a stimulus in harmonising some of this access to data.”

We finally talked about new products and activities in the near future. Keiran anticipated that HR Wallingford’s existing forecasting service for nearshore coastal marine environment will be made available through SeaZone, as it is more aligned to SeaZone’s portfolio of products and services.

“It is available now but we are just formalising branding and expecting formal release within the next few months” states Alison.

To conclude both Keiran and Alison reinforced that the SeaZone brand will continue to strengthen its leading position in the market with an expanded portfolio of products and services to meet growing global marine GI needs and deliver better data, better science and improved decisions.

*Maria Pellegrini, GeoConnexionUK editor, maria@geoconnexion.com*

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