

Proceedings of the 2007 Annual Coastal Forum of the Sefton Coast Partnership

Introduction

The 8th Annual Sefton Coast Forum 'People, Places and Nature' took place on Saturday 7th July 2007 at the Floral Hall Southport. The Forum was officially opened by the Mayor of Sefton, Councillor Richard Hands.

Background to the Forum

The Forum is intended to provide an opportunity for anyone who is interested in the future of the Sefton Coast to contribute to the work of the Partnership. The aim of the Forum is to improve communication among local communities, businesses and organisations with an interest in the coastal zone. The Sefton Coast Partnership includes representatives of local communities as well as organisations directly involved in the management of the Sefton Coast.

2007 was the first time this all day event had taken place in the summer. It was well attended and proved a great success.

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This was a full day's event including presentations, participatory sessions for delegates, poster displays and information stands.

Volunteer Award

This year's Volunteer Award, presented by the Mayor of Sefton, was a split decision and so for the first time it was agreed that two awards should be presented, reflecting the huge value of the contributions made by volunteers to the work on the Sefton Coast. In recognition of their outstanding contribution over many years, the awards were presented to Dr. Reg Yorke and Mr. Ted Marshall.

Reg has been a dedicated volunteer serving the Sefton Coast Partnership as voluntary Chairman of the History and Archaeology Task Group for many years. Reg has involved himself with many of the coastal partners over the years, offering expert advice and an unequalled breadth of knowledge of the cultural history of the coast. Some of his many achievements include working with the National Trust in developing the Formby Asparagus Project, the historical development of Freshfield Dune Heath with the Lancashire Wildlife Trust, and encouraging and supporting an excellent programme of events and activities throughout Sefton in celebration of National Archaeology Week following on from the Sefton Conference on History and Archaeology. Reg's commitment to the local area also sees him act as Chair of the Formby Civic Society.

Ted has served as a volunteer on the coast for almost 40 years across a number of different partnership organisations. Ted's commitment to the conservation work on the coast stems from his love of bird watching, and he can most regularly be found as a volunteer Hide Warden at the RSPB Marshside reserve. Ted has an infectious enthusiasm for the coast and its wildlife, and enjoys nothing more than to help visitors make the most of their experiences. He was recently awarded a North West Volunteer of the Year Award for his work as a Volunteer Warden for Natural England at Ainsdale Sand

Dunes National Nature Reserve, actively supports the Red Squirrel conservation work of the Lancashire Wildlife Trust, and is an active member of the Ainsdale Civic Society.

Presentations

Four presentations took place in the morning session, introduced by Ted Jackson MBE, Chair of the Sefton Coast Partnership:

1. Keynote Address presented by Pam Warhurst, Natural England Board representative for the North West Region.

Pam introduced the theme of this year's Forum, 'People, Places and Nature', as the key priorities for the newly formed governmental organisation Natural England. The environment has never been higher on the public and political agenda, and Natural England aims to rise to all of the environmental challenges facing us.

Pam set out the 4 Strategic Outcomes of Natural England:

A healthy natural environment;

More people enjoying, understanding, and acting to improve the natural environment;

Sustainable use of the natural environment;

Decision making which collectively secures the future of the natural environment.

Pam emphasised the role people have to play in these outcomes, particularly in facing the challenges of climate change, and encouraged champions for the natural environment to come forward and be heard. Pam then highlighted some of the ways in which Natural England would be engaging with partner organisations and projects throughout the North West, including the marine environment work of the Liverpool Bay SPA, access work such as the development of the North West Coastal Trail, and the Natural Economy North West programme demonstrating the relevance of the natural environment to socio-economic development.

Finally, Pam addressed the importance of partnerships such as the Sefton Coast Partnership in helping to cut right across the natural environment agenda, through multifunctional purposes and linking with local communities.

2. SCP Draft Annual Report presented by Andrew Hall, Sefton MBC

Andrew introduced the key Sefton Coast Partnership outputs from the past 12 months, emphasising the 'value through partnership' working. Andrew demonstrated the close alignment of SCP's work areas to Natural England's objectives.

Notable partnership highlights included project delivery through Mersey Waterfront Regional Park, added value in Integrated Coastal Zone Management, Sefton Coast Footpath improvements, habitat improvements at Freshfield Dune Heath, development of the Nature Conservation and Biodiversity Strategy, and work on tackling the Squirrel Pox virus. Andrew also summarised the extensive work of the partnership Task Groups, and other project areas delivered in partnership including the Sefton Woodlands Forest Plan and the Beach and Shoreline Management group.

In summary, the extent of partnership working in Sefton was seen to be extremely high. The range of work and collaborative effort of partners this year has helped to improve the

sense of place, the involvement of stakeholders, and engagement with the wider community for the benefit of the Sefton Coast.

3. Implementing Nature Conservation and Enhancement presented by John Houston, Biodiversity Project Officer, SCP.

John introduced the launch of the draft Nature Conservation Strategy and Biodiversity Delivery Plan 2007. Copies of the draft strategy, open for public consultation until 31 August, have been placed in every library and on the Sefton Coast Partnership website. The strategy sets out some key principles in the partners' approaches to managing the natural coast; addresses the conservation issues and challenges that face the coast; and summarises some of the key projects already identified for the next 5-10 years. The Draft Strategy has been developed through a collaborative process involving a wide range of stakeholders, including public workshops and issues groups.

John Houston then followed this by looking at some projects currently under way to help implement the Strategy. The Sefton Coast Wetlands Project, sponsored by Natural England's Science and Evidence Team, is collating all of the current knowledge and data regarding the internationally important wet slack areas of the dune coast, in order to better understand the processes affecting these special habitats. An investigation is also under way into the History of Sand Extraction around Formby Point, which has had a dramatic impact on the local landscape, habitats and wildlife over time.

Finally John announced details of a new project about landscape, conservation, heritage and people, and how the Partnership had been successful in being awarded a 'Planning Grant' by the Heritage Lottery Fund for the development of a full application for a Landscape Partnership Scheme. The full application to Heritage Lottery is due by the end of March 2008, and the partnership is hoping to secure a project value of up to £1million.

4. The Rivers Alt and Crossens – History and current issues presented by Ian Rowlands, Flood Risk Manager, the Environment Agency

Ian Rowlands from the Environment Agency gave a very topical presentation on flood risk, and with outline proposals to manage flood risk in certain parts of the catchment area. Ian introduced us to the principles of flood risk management, before taking us on a fascinating historical journey describing the development of the Alt and Crossens catchment areas, from the last ice age, through open water and marsh hinterlands, to the present day pumped drainage schemes.

Ian then outlined the principles behind the Lower Alt Strategy for flood risk management, combining the pumped drainage of a refurbished pumping station with temporary storage of flood waters through the creation of a 'washland' area, which would also bring significant benefits for wildlife enhancement, landscape and amenity.

Open question and answer session

There then followed a question and answer session from the floor to all presenters, summarised below.

3 questions were addressed by Ian Rowlands of the Environment Agency:

Q: How much are peat levels dropping, and how fast is peat oxygenating in the West Lancs area?

A: Not certain, but from memory peat has subsided approximately 1m over the past 40 years. Unable to answer question about peat oxygenation levels.

Q: Is the managed retreat programme at Hesketh outmarsh a common way forward, and how are these projects determined?

A: Yes, there are many similar schemes all around the country. The Hesketh programme was developed as a habitat restoration opportunity arose in partnership with the RSPB.

Q: Following the closure of the sand winning plant at Southport there appears to be more sand on Southport beach. Is EA studying the impact of the increase in sand?

A: This would not be a function of EA as it is not pertinent to any local flood risk management work. Sefton Council would consider this kind of issue through its Shoreline Management Plan process and Technical Services department.

1 question was put to John Houston:

Q: How has the Council decision on no tree felling been accounted for within the Nature Conservation Strategy?

A: The Strategy aims to combine local interests with the Sefton Woodland Plan and statutory conservation requirements. It is not a case of 'woods vs dunes', but rather aiming to maintain the footprint of the Forest Plan area alongside the area of dunes in response to coastal changes. Everyone has been invited to respond to the Strategy. The Sefton Council Cabinet asked the Sefton Coast Partnership to consult on this, and Council will receive a full report back as part of the consultative process.

1 final question was addressed to Pam Warhurst:

Q: Will the right of access to coastal waters be protected in relation to the new Marine Bill?

A: Consultation is still in progress both on the Coastal Access Project and the Marine Bill, and so this cannot be answered at the present time, however the general principle of the coastal access project are concerned with linear use rather than to and from coastal waters, and will be prioritising sites of greatest need first.

'Sustainable Sands' short film, presented by pupils of Formby High School

The morning session was wrapped up by a lively and exciting DVD presentation on 'Sustainable Sands' presented by Kerry Blanchard, Head of Humanities, and pupils from Formby High School. The DVD has been developed as part of a teaching resource aimed at 11-14 year olds, and included short extracts on 'a day in the life of a Coastal Ranger' and 'Coastal Conflicts'.

Following lunch the afternoon consisted of 4 parallel 'break out' sessions, of which delegates had the choice of attending 2.

1. Sefton Coast Woodlands – Forest Plan 5 Year Review, facilitated by Nick Roach, Mersey Forest

The Sefton Coast Woodlands Forest Plan was approved for implementation in 2002. Now into its 5th year, the cumulative progress of the plan is being assessed. The workshop was introduced with a summary of some of the key achievements of the past 5

years, with 410 hectares of forest being actively managed within the scope of the plan by a partnership of 21 owners.

Approximately 20% of the forest area has had some management activity carried out over the first 5 years (such as thinning, coppicing or restocking), with an additional 7 hectares of new planting and natural regeneration. 290 hectares of woodland have been certified by the FSC as sustainably managed under the UK Woodland Assurance Scheme. Fire protection measures have also been implemented to combat the risks of dry summer fires.

The review process demonstrated a clear commitment and great progress by the land owners and managers in supporting the objectives of the Forest Plan. A series of public walks and meetings have also been held, alongside innovative consultation ideas such as a web 'blog', and involving young people through the North Ainsdale City Learning Centre and Formby schools.

Some key issues identified that remain as a challenge to the partnership in the future are:

- Relatively low timber prices in the context of rising management costs
- The parapox virus introduced into the red squirrel population by grey squirrel incursion into the squirrel reserve
- Tree disease (red needle blight)

2. National Archaeology Week – Launch of Sefton Events Programme, facilitated by Dr. Jen Lewis, History and Archaeology Task Group

Building on the success of the inaugural 2006 events programme, the SCP History and Archaeology Task Group launched their partnership programme of events for 2007.

Jen introduced delegates with a tantalising glimpse of the history of the coast over the past 10,000 years, to wet the appetites for those wanting to find out more. Last year 470 members of the public of all ages took part in a range of archaeological and historical activities, held in different locations throughout the district from Waterloo to Churchtown. The 2007 events programme is even more varied than last year, and it is hoped will be a huge success.

Details of all the events can be found in the *Events Guide 2007/08 to Sefton's Natural Coast*, as well as the Council for British Archaeology's *National Archaeology Week 2007 National Events Guide*.

3. Sharing Wildlife Knowledge – Getting Involved with Merseyside Biobank, facilitated by John Houston, Sefton Biodiversity Project Officer

The aims of the workshop were to discuss ideas for the improvement of collection, collation and dissemination of geological and biological information on the Sefton Coast, and to develop ideas to encourage participation in volunteer recording schemes.

Delegates were introduced to the work of Merseyside Biobank as a central records archive for data and monitoring of the natural environment. Biobank are keen to encourage volunteers to get involved in formal and informal wildlife monitoring activities, and discussions were held around how best to encourage participation and what Biobank could do to help better facilitate this work.

In particular, discussions explored ways to involve a wider range of people in recording activity across the Sefton Coast and, if the Heritage Lottery Landscape application should be successful, proposals to develop a specific project on recording (involvement, training etc) in the Sefton Coast Landscape Partnership Scheme were discussed.

4. Improving Physical Access, facilitated by Dominique Tilley, Sefton MBC Technical Services Access Officer

The workshop was introduced with a short presentation on the current condition of physical access infrastructure on the Sefton Coast. In 2004 an Access Strategy and a Communication, Interpretation and Visitor Product Development (CIPD) Strategy were produced through the Partnership. Current key projects from these strategies include the Gateway Projects for Crosby, Formby and Ainsdale, the development of the Sefton Coast Footpath, and interpretation work around the 'Sefton's Natural Coast' branding. The Nature Conservation Strategy was also discussed as integral to the visitor's experience of the coast.

Delegates were then split into smaller discussion groups, focusing on the main issues:

- There was general agreement that the Sefton's natural Coast branding was a success, but more emphasis could be focused on the public transport links.
- Generally people wanted better quality footpath and cycling surfaces, but felt that tarmac had a harsh 'unnatural' look. Stone surfaces were higher maintenance but looked more natural, however not always appropriate for cycling and disabled access.
- The introduction of grazing schemes was seen as providing a benefit to access through the creation of better managed and waymarked routes, provided the fencing was not too intrusive on the access experience.
- Facilities lacked the provision of toilets along the coast. Bins and benches were understood to be high maintenance and can have a negative impact on the environment.
- A feasibility study for the new Hightown-Formby cycle route was discussed, with some general concern over routing cyclists through Formby where congestion and inconsiderate motoring were considered problems. Cyclists said to prefer more natural surfaced routes than road or tarmac routes. Also concerns about the unmanned level crossings.
- General discussions around the car parking provision at the National Trust site and Victoria Road; opposition to white lines painted on paths; suggested parallel routes to cater for natural surfaced routes alongside surfaced routes for the less able, cyclists etc; concerns about illegal motorcycling.

Forum Close

The Chair of Sefton Coast Partnership, Mr Ted Jackson, thanked everyone who attended and who took part in the planning and execution of the 2007 Forum, a free event funded by Sefton Council and Natural England.