

Sefton Coast Partnership Forum 2006

The History of Nature Conservation on the Sefton Coast



SUMMARY

Philip H. Smith

The fact that the Sefton coast is special for wildlife has been recognised for at least 200 years. At first this heritage was in the hands of Lords of the Manor and its protection came about indirectly through various non-destructive land-uses, such as Rabbit warrening. However, by the late 19th century, the pressure for development was almost unstoppable and large areas of coastal land began to disappear under bricks and mortar. Perhaps fortuitously, at the same time, the popularity of golf led to extensive areas being saved from built development.

The first national recognition of the need to conserve parts of the coast for nature came in 1915, but formal designation of wildlife sites was delayed until 1956 with the establishment of the Southport Sanctuary to protect wild goose roosts. Sites of Special Scientific Interest followed from 1963 onwards and the first National Nature Reserve (NNR) was designated at Ainsdale Sand Dunes in 1965 when, after 15 years of negotiation, The Nature Conservancy (now English Nature) bought the land for the nation from the Weld Blundell Estate.. Through its Enterprise Neptune Campaign, the National Trust purchased Formby Point two years later. Further NNRs came in 1980 on the Ribble Marshes and in 1984 at Cabin Hill near Formby, both after threats of development.

Perhaps unexpectedly, one of the biggest boosts to nature conservation on the coast was local government reorganisation in 1974. This brought the whole coastline under the control of one local authority, Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council, and set up Merseyside County Council with a strategic planning role. The County Structure Plan included several conservation initiatives, including a proposal to establish a local authority nature reserve (LNR) at Ainsdale and Birkdale Sandhills. This was duly declared by the Borough Council in 1980, a second LNR at Ravenmeols Sandhills following in 1985.

After the demise of the County Council, Sefton Council's own Unitary Development Plan (1991) further strengthened protective policies, including the designation of 24 Sites of Local Biological Interest in the coastal zone. An example is Crosby Marine Park.

The voluntary conservation bodies have also been active on the Sefton Coast. In the mid-1980s, the Lancashire Trust for Nature Conservation (now the Wildlife Trust) obtained an agreement with Mersey Docks and Harbour Company to manage part of the dock estate at Seaforth as a Nature Reserve. Then, in 2004, the Trust purchased the Freshfield Dune Heath from the Ministry of Defence with the help of the Heritage

Lottery Fund. Meanwhile, in 1995, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds leased a large area of grazing marsh near Southport to establish the Marshside Nature Reserve.

There are also three international conservation designations on the coast. In 1985, the foreshore and duneland were listed under the Ramsar Convention on the Protection of Wetlands Especially as Waterfowl Habitat. Then, in 1995, this area, excluding the sand-dunes, was given Special Protection Area status under the EU Birds Directive. Finally, a large part of the dune system and associated foreshore was selected in 1996 as a candidate Special Area of Conservation under the Habitats Directive. These last two have now been combined under Natura 2000, which aims to protect for the future all the most important European habitats and species.

Site protection is obviously important but effective conservation of nature requires positive management. Good husbandry really got going coast-wide with the Sefton Coast Management Scheme (now the Partnership), inaugurated by Merseyside County Council, Sefton Borough Council and the Countryside Commission in 1978. Initially, the Scheme had to tackle the problem of sand-dune erosion caused by unregulated public recreation at Formby Point and elsewhere. More recently, the emphasis has been on encouraging dynamic coastal processes. An example is the so-called Green Beach at Birkdale where minor changes in management practice has led to over 60ha (150 acres) of new sand-dune, dune-slack and salt-marsh being formed in a few years with a remarkably rich diversity of associated plants and animals, including many local specialities.

The Scheme was also successful in attracting European funding for a Life Project during the 1990s. This enabled management plans to be drawn up for a number of coastal sites, including golf courses, together with a Nature Conservation Strategy for the Special Area of Conservation. There was also a major land purchase at Ravenmeols to add to the existing LNR.

In the early 1990s, English Nature began its Dune Restoration Plan in Ainsdale Sand Dunes NNR. This includes removal of about 40ha (100 acres) of pine plantation (the so-called frontal woodlands) with follow-up grazing by sheep. The first two phases have successfully restored ecologically rich open sand-dunes and slacks with breeding Natterjack Toads. However, the final two phases have been held up by local opposition to tree-felling and the scheme is still under review following a major Environmental Impact study.

Despite the recent addition of new habitats at Birkdale, much of the dune system is over-mature, with too much coarse grassland and scrub. There is a number of reasons for this. First, Sea Buckthorn, introduced in about 1900, spread rapidly from the 1960s onwards after myxomatosis killed off the Rabbits. The dense thickets of this spiny shrub eliminate the characteristic dune flora and fauna and also enrich the soil with nitrogen, encouraging colonisation by other woody plants such as birch and poplar. Land managers are now getting on top of the scrub problem but it is a big, expensive and ongoing job.

The spread of coarse grassland on the sand-dunes has been dramatic since the late 1980s and may, in part, be due to aerial deposition of nitrogen from air pollution. This trend could be reversed by grazing with livestock – a traditional form of land-use here. Sheep-grazing has been trialled at several sites and could be extended in the near future, perhaps with other types of grazing animal such as cattle.

Finally, there is the challenge of climate change and global warming. Already we are seeing major changes in the distribution of some creatures, particularly fast-breeding insects such as butterflies and dragonflies which are responding to warmer summers. Since 1989, five new species of dragonfly have been recorded on the Sefton Coast. If we get wetter winters, perhaps the Natterjack Toad will benefit from more water in its breeding slacks. But summer droughts could cancel out that benefit. Increased winter storms might wash away more valuable dune habitat at Formby Point.

The key to the future must be flexibility in management policies to ensure that the natural wonders of the Sefton Coast will continue to delight our descendents as they have our generation.