

SEFTON COAST PARTNERSHIP

NATURE CONSERVATION STRATEGY

NOTE OF FIELD VISITS 1/8/06 AND 3/8/06



Following a series of four Working Group meetings and consultation on the Issues Report for the Nature Conservation Strategy two field visits were arranged. The first meeting concentrated on the changing coastline and how this impacts on nature and public amenity. The second meeting looked at the management of a balance of habitats at the landscape scale. Background notes were produced for the visits.

These can be found on the Sefton Coast Partnership website at www.seftoncoast.org.uk/index_consultnature.html

Participants were;

Name	Organisation	Visit 1/8/06	Visit 3/8/06
John Houston	Sefton Coast Partnership	✓	✓
Reg Yorke	Formby Civic Society	✓	✓
John Mulliner	Southport Shore Interest Group	✓	
John Crosbie	Sefton Council –Environmental	✓	
Chris Bennett	MEAS	✓	✓
Rachael Parks	Red Alert /RSPB	✓	
Andrew Brockbank	National Trust	✓	✓
Graham Lymbery	Sefton Council –Technical Services	✓	
Rachel Northover	Sefton Council –Leisure Services	✓	✓
David Taylor	SCP Board / Formby Golf Course	✓	
David Willis	Formby Resident	✓	
Ginny Willis	Formby Resident	✓	
Steve White	Lancashire Wildlife Trust	✓	✓
Mark Bennett	Red Alert		✓
Pauline Mitchell	TEP		✓
Phil Smith	Lancashire Wildlife Trust		✓
Cathy Elwin	Mersey Waterfront		✓
Nick Roche	Mersey Forest		✓
Alan Hollway	Sefton CoastWatch		✓
Peter Thornton	Formby Area Committee		✓
Shirley Childs	Formby Resident		✓
Lindsay Syme	Environment Agency		✓
Mike Downey	English Nature		✓
Peter Gahan	Sefton Council –Leisure Services		✓

Apologies were received from;

Rev Derek Bowker, Dave Earl, Zoe Freeman, Councillor Peter Brough, Councillor Sue McGuire, Les Jarvis, Peter Lucas, Arthur Bowling, Julie Kirk, Maureen Rimmer, Gillian Gentles, Peter Sandman and Dave McAleavy.

Field Visit 1 – coastal change

Stop 1 –National Trust, Formby Point

Progressive coastal erosion at Formby Point is forcing the National Trust to prepare to re-locate the main car-park. Left to nature, active drifts of blowing sand cover a width of up to 200m from the shore in some places and have now reached the main woodland belt. Based on current rates of erosion, estimates can be made for the future development of the coast at this point. There is no evidence to suggest that these rates will slow or reverse so we have to plan for continued erosion.

There is general acceptance of the situation and recognition that, as neither livelihoods nor property are threatened in the 50 year scenarios; there is not a good argument at present for coastal engineering responses. There is, however, a squeeze on the landscape and its capacity to absorb increasing visitor pressure.

Some expressed concern about the need for better access control, especially in the frontal dunes, to reduce erosion caused by trampling. The problems are acknowledged by the National Trust—relocating the car-park further inland would allow a better arrangement for access to the beach.

The nature of natural mobile dunes, dominated by Marram Grass, is understood and this landscape is considered to be attractive. Marram Grass is the main factor in dune stabilisation and dune formation. The function of marram grass in slowing and stabilising the sand sheets is also recognised. Scrub and woodland does influence sand movement but cannot respond in the same way as Marram Grass to mobile dune conditions.

Stop 2 –Crosby Coastal Park

Since the construction of the park in the late 1960s there has been a steady movement of sand into the 'bay' formed by the construction of the sea wall. As the level of the upper beach rose, first sand built up against the sea wall and then crossed the promenade to accumulate as dunes and dune grassland.

An dune landscape has formed. This has considerable biological interest. But local residents are concerned about the build up and this some perceive as a loss of amenity. Sefton Council is currently assessing the local concerns.

The movement of sand is a natural process –it would be expensive to try to move it further up the coast –and more would arrive. Any solution for the area should look at the issues on the beach (SSSI) and the park together. Access and amenity are important and the future of the promenade must be considered.

The area is particularly important for mobile dune plant communities –with a continuous supply of sand it should be possible to maintain these features.

Stop 3 –Green Beach and Birkdale Sandhills

The 'green beach' feature at Birkdale is a natural phenomenon driven by coastal processes. The rapid growth of the green beach habitats has been aided by the beach management strategy introduced in the 1990s which banned cars from this part of the foreshore.

The site is well studied –its growth shows no signs of slowing down. Ideally it should be left unmanaged –but action is taken to hand-pull Sea Buckthorn seedlings. Left to spread this plant would threaten the high value of the site for other plants. This was understood.

The development is accepted as natural –the concerns of the tourism interests at Southport are noted as are the small scale works to remove some areas of Spartina grass. Southport beach is accreting (at c. 4 cm a year) so whilst there will be further growth of vegetation in years to come this has to be set against predicted sea level rise which will reverse the trend at some point in the future.

Biologically rich wet slack habitats lie inland from the green beach along the Velvet Trail. These have to be maintained by active management as the coastal road is a constraint to allowing free movement of sand. The Sefton Coast has an estimated 40% of the England total of wet slack habitat. The link between the biological value of slacks and dune hydrology is understood –although concerns were expressed that we do not know enough about how the system operates.

Field Visit 2 – achieving a balance at the landscape scale

Stop 1 –Ainsdale Sand Dunes National Nature Reserve

Management at Ainsdale seeks a balance between woodland and dune habitats. Most seemed to agree that this is what gives the Sefton Coast its character –the view of the dunes through the trees is enjoyed.

The landscape of the Ainsdale dunes (NNR and LNR) is an open area of rolling dunes and wet slacks. After several years of scrub clearance the regrowth of scrub is controlled by grazing. To most the landscape was attractive and awe-inspiring in its scale given its position so close to urban areas. The link to the former landscapes of the warrens was appreciated. Some found the landscape barren and would prefer to see at least some small patches of woodland and scrub retained. Perhaps a general conclusion would be that the management objectives for this area are understood but that this would not be the preferred landscape for the whole of the coast.

Ainsdale lies at the heart of the Sefton Coast slack system (the wet valleys in between the dunes). This is probably the most important area in England for these rare features. The dune water table is affected by pine plantations and monitoring of water levels has shown an average rise of about 35 cm since the clearance work. Climate change modelling predicts that the average water table may be at least 1m lower by the 2080s. This would have consequences for the slacks.

The need to allow natural dune mobility to reach any future water table level was appreciated. The Ainsdale sand hills would be one of the few places on the coast where there is the space to allow natural slack development.

Stop 2 –National Trust –Warren Farm

The National Trust manages an historic and diverse landscape at Formby Point. Whilst accepting change to the farming economy, access demands, coast erosion and conservation priorities the Trust aims to preserve all the elements of the landscape –

this means keeping examples of asparagus cultivation, managing woodlands, maintaining the old field systems through grazing and satisfying the needs of visitors. Ensuring that the conservation value of this mixed landscape is maintained is not just a necessary activity –it also greatly enhances the experience for visitors.

In managing the field system through grazing the Trust is seeking to establish dune grassland habitat which will support characteristic species.

The need to balance a variety of interests and values was appreciated.

Stop 3. –Birkdale Hills Local Nature Reserve

The Birkdale Hills LNR is owned and managed by Sefton Council. Since the 1970s Sefton Council has noted a growing problem of scrub development and spread of coarse grasses due, in part, to the loss of grazing by rabbits. Sefton Council has been able to control scrub development in the important slack series of the Birkdale Frontal dunes and has carried out large scale operations in the main Birkdale Hills.

A long-term solution is required. Consideration is now being given to the retention of some areas of deciduous woodland as part of natural dune succession. Some found the landscape attractive in its current state and would not wish there to be further removal of scrub. On the other hand, the spread of deciduous woodland across the site was seen as a corridor for Grey Squirrel to reach the Ainsdale pinewoods. Some considered the spread of scrub and woodland a threat to dune habitats.

The fundamental question was ‘what is a dune system’? Ecologists argue that it should be an open system, with only small amounts of scrub and natural woodland growth –but they also say that such a landscape is attractive to people and that wooded dune areas may not be the choice of society at large.

The discussions were interesting. What everyone had in common was a passion for the coastal area; if there was there a major threat from development we would probably be united in defending the dunes. But there are wide differences in people’s preferred landscapes. Some like the wide open spaces of the Ainsdale dunes, others prefer the more diverse man-made landscape of Formby Point, or would want to see much more scrub and woodland in the landscape. Some are passionate about the pinewoods; others like woods but prefer broadleaved woods and so on.

Although the Sefton Coast is probably big enough to accommodate all these landscapes there are certain obligations falling to land managers which focus on the very special nature locally, nationally and internationally of the sand dunes of the Sefton Coast. First and foremost this is a sand dune system –its natural value could be destroyed in many ways. The challenge for the Sefton Coast Partnership and local communities is how to take this special area into the next century as a sand dune coast so that the link that stretches back hundreds of years is maintained.