

Sefton Coast Nature Conservation Strategy and Biodiversity Delivery Plan

Issues Report –for consultation

Prepared by the Sefton Coast Partnership
Nature Conservation Task Group

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This document, a summary and response forms also available on
www.seftoncoast.org.uk/index_consultnature.html

Consultation open until 31 March 2006

1. Introduction

This *Issues Report* has been prepared by the Sefton Coast Partnership to begin the review of coastwide objectives and policies for nature conservation. The report covers all the open land within the area of the Sefton Coast Partnership. It addresses the physical processes acting on the coast and issues concerning the conservation of habitats and species. The report describes the steps that will be taken to develop a *Nature Conservation Strategy and Biodiversity Delivery Plan* which will form part of the revised Coast Management Plan.

2. Background

The Sefton Coast has long been recognised as one of the most important sites in Great Britain for nature. Coordinated policies for nature conservation have been developed in successive coast management plans since the early-1980s. Over the last decade there has been a strengthening of the protection of nature through UK policy and legislation supported by the EU Directives for wildlife.

In 1994 the UK Government proposed the Sefton Coast as a possible Special Area of Conservation (SAC) under the EU Habitats Directive. This allowed coastal partners to apply to the EU Life-Nature fund to support the development of a conservation strategy for this 'European site'. The 'Sefton Coast LIFE project' ran from 1995-1999 and carried out a range of actions including the development of site management plans, the purchase of land at Ravenmeols, habitat and species surveys, and support for habitat restoration and management actions across the dune coast. In September 1999 a *conservation strategy* for the Sefton Coast candidate Special Area of Conservation was endorsed by Sefton Council, English Nature and the National Trust.

The Ribble and Alt Estuaries Special Protection Area (SPA), along with the intertidal components of the Sefton Coast SAC is classed as a 'European marine site' under UK legislation (The Conservation (Natural Habitats) Regulations 1994). Management guidance for this site is provided by English Nature through what is termed a 'Regulation 33 package'. This was published in 2001 and sets out the conservation objectives for the protection of the habitats and the bird populations which they support.

In reviewing the current conservation strategy we now wish to widen its remit to cover the whole coast and to incorporate the conservation targets of the North Merseyside Biodiversity Action Plan.

Since the publication of the 1999 conservation strategy there have been some significant initiatives;

- In 2001 the Sefton Coast Partnership followed on from the work of Sefton Coast Management Scheme (1978-2001). It broadened representation and embraced the interests of economic development, private land-ownership and local communities. In 2003 a Forest Plan for the Sefton Coast Woodlands was adopted to guide work for 10-20 years. The updated Coast Management Plan (to be prepared in 2006) will be advised by three strategies: (i) access, (ii) communication, interpretation & tourism and (iii) nature conservation.

- The suite of national conservation designations on the Sefton Coast was reviewed by the UK Government (through English Nature) leading to the designation of the Sefton Coast SSSI, an amalgamation and enlargement of five former sites. A new designation, The Mersey Narrows SSSI, has also been proposed;
- The European Commission has approved an initial list of ‘Sites of Community Interest’ for the Atlantic Biogeographical Region which includes the UK. The UK Government formally designated the UK list of Special Areas of Conservation on 1 April 2005. Along with Special Protection Areas under the EU Birds Directive these contribute to the EU Natura 2000 network.
- The global biodiversity initiative has grown in influence and support. All European governments have signed a declaration to halt the loss of biodiversity by 2010, the UK Government has set a Public Service Agreement target to have 95% of all UK protected sites (SSSIs) in favourable condition by 2010, and it has also endorsed the IUCN Countdown 2010 campaign (an awareness raising initiative). The Sefton Community Strategy has endorsed these targets for the Borough of Sefton.
- A Biodiversity Strategy for England was published in 2002. This guides action throughout England and supports the regional and local initiatives. A North Merseyside Local Biodiversity Action Plan has been developed and is beginning to make an impact on the ground. A Local Biodiversity Manager has now been appointed to maintain progress.
- Evidence for climate change is now accepted by the EU and the UK Government. Statutory Agencies such as the Environment Agency and English Nature now include potential impacts in their forecasts and Government is undertaking consultation on an Adaptation Policy Framework. A number of initiatives focus on North West England: studies are underway to address the potential impacts of climate change on nature values, tourism and the economy. The Sefton Borough Partnership recognises that there may be significant impacts and will prepare a response strategy by 2007.
- The EU Water Framework Directive came into force in 2000. The Ribble catchment was selected as the UK pilot to develop management responses to the requirements of the Directive. The catchment includes the main slack system of the Ainsdale and Birkdale dunes –recognised nationally as habitats under particular threat.
- National, regional and local Government have published a number of key supporting documents including Planning Policy Statement 9 on Biodiversity and Geological Conservation, the Regional Spatial Strategy and the Regional Economic Strategy. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 gave greater powers to English Nature for the protection of wildlife.
- In 2006 the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill will establish Natural England (from the amalgamation of English Nature, Countryside Agency and Rural Development Service) and will bring a duty to every public authority to conserve biodiversity.

- Membership and support for conservation charities continues to grow: National Trust (3.3 million), RSPB (1 million +) and Wildlife Trusts (600,000).
- Forward planning is becoming increasingly important with 50-100 year visions commonly used in the economic, social and environmental sectors. The nature conservation strategy will support the implementation of sustainable development in Sefton, by supporting the links between environmental, economic and social issues.

Taking these issues together there is a need to bring the current nature conservation strategy up to date.

3. Setting the scene: The nature of the coast

The Sefton Coast is a particularly special area for wildlife. It owes this in part to the variety of habitats that can be found in a relatively small area, but also largely due to its geographical position which allows the overlap of ‘northern’ and ‘southern’ species and mild conditions for wintering birds.

Although perceived to be ‘wild’ most of the area would be better described as semi-natural habitat. The marine zone, beaches and foredunes are relatively natural but beyond the saltmarshes and mobile dune ridges the landscape becomes more influenced by human activity. Centuries of grazing with livestock, the use of the dunes for rabbit warrens, asparagus farming, the cutting of scrub and the management of small deciduous woodlands had, by the twentieth Century, created a distinctive cultural landscape.

Landowners in the nineteenth Century saw little value in the open landscape and set about the development of the area with new housing, golf courses and extensive pine plantations. Over 40% of the original dune area has been lost to development. On the coast today is a combination of two landscapes; an older open semi-agricultural landscape and a more recent twentieth Century landscape –but it is this combination which gives the Sefton Coast an unique and recognisable character.

Along the Ribble estuary land was ‘claimed’ from the sea for the growth of Southport and for agricultural use (2320 ha have been enclosed for agriculture since 1800).

Dunes are rare features in the UK, and the Sefton Coast, as one of the largest sites (over 2000 ha), is important for the conservation of the specialised plants and animals of the dunes, dune forming processes and dune landforms. About 20% of the total area of sand dunes in England (9276 ha) is found on the Sefton Coast. The most up-to-date inventory of vascular plants on the Sefton Coast lists over 1000 species associated with the dune system. The richest habitats are those associated with bare ground, wetlands and fixed dunes. The Sefton Coast has the richest flora of any comparatively sized area in northern England. The dune system also supports about 40% of the UK population of the Natterjack Toad, a specific northern race of the Sand Lizard and many rare species of beetles, moths, bees and other invertebrates.

To sustain these values nature needs to be resilient to change but also flexible. There are, however, significant challenges ahead from trends such as global warming, rising sea levels, nutrient

deposition, acid rainfall, and the pressures on the dune coast for recreation and coastal protection. A functioning ecosystem must allow room for natural processes; but much of the Sefton Coast is already constrained by the proximity of housing and infrastructure and coast erosion at Formby Point is leading to pressure on habitats.

There are times when it is important to take stock of the situation and consider the future. In 2004 we completed a detailed survey of the plant communities of the dunes. When comparing this to a baseline survey from 1989 some potentially worrying trends have emerged. There are now fewer young slacks (wet wind-formed hollows) to provide a succession of wetland habitats for the future. Similarly dune grasslands appear to be becoming dominated by coarse vegetation which crowds out lower-growing plants. We have to set these observations against the natural trends in dune ecosystems. Dunes are famous for the study of the succession of habitats from pioneering plants on the strandline to mature scrub and heathland: but we may now be seeing an accelerated succession leading to reduced diversity. Mobility (dynamism) is a natural element of dune systems and one would expect, over long time periods, to see cycles of instability and stability. However, if external factors change, such as the input of nutrients to the system, these natural processes may be disrupted leading to long-term stability and soil development.

Dune managers have developed restoration and management techniques over recent decades. These could be applied more widely. With less land now available for the natural development of dunes interventions may be necessary to preserve the wild character of the coast. We have to address both ongoing (sustainable) management of dunes, woodlands and heaths by grazing, mowing, felling and replanting but we also need to consider a range of restoration actions.

Conservation land managers are convinced that restoration action will necessary in the future to preserve the range of slack habitats from bare sand pools to wet woodland, and dune habitats from blowouts and sand sheets to dune grassland and successional scrub. Rare species depend on the younger stages of dune succession and such habitats should be part of the future of the Sefton Coast whether by natural means or intervention. The conservation of dune forming processes is of equal importance.

The international importance of the Sefton Coast brings with it challenges but also something to celebrate. The conservation work carried out on the coast over the last 40 years has confirmed its place as one of the most important coastal areas in the UK.

In reviewing the Nature Conservation Strategy there is now an opportunity to combine the statutory nature conservation obligations which underpin coastal management in Sefton with the growing influence and importance of local action for biodiversity. The North Merseyside Biodiversity Action Plan is a local initiative which takes action for all wildlife and has a special focus on the wildlife that is important for people.

The Sefton Coast Partnership wishes to engage in discussion with land managers, conservation agencies and local communities to set a course for the conservation of landscapes, habitats and species from a long-term perspective.

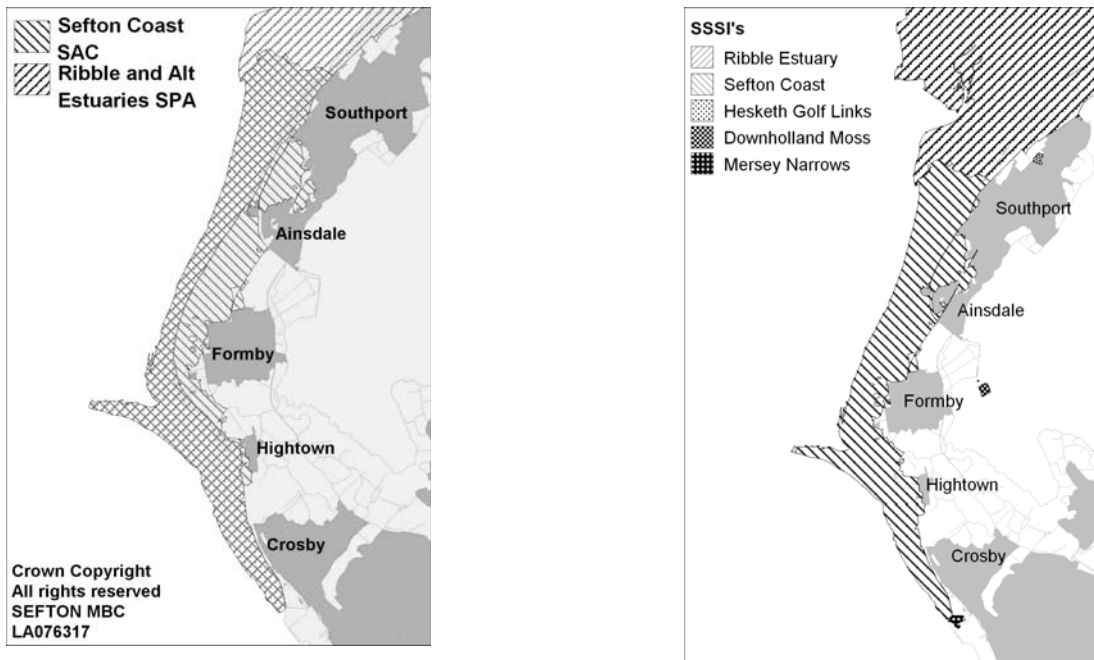
A successful conservation programme for the Sefton Coast will depend on good planning, with local communities consulted by land managers about their ideas, ensuring that land is managed, establishing long-term programmes for habitat management linked to access and public

enjoyment of the area, undertaking restoration actions as necessary and monitoring the effect of the actions so that there is a continual learning process. The revised strategy will therefore be linked to a consultation process and a rolling work programme similar to that developed for the Sefton Coast Woodlands Forest Plan.

4. Areas and designations

Protection of nature on the Sefton Coast developed step-by-step through the statutory processes which operate in the UK. From the 1960s to the early 2000s a suite of Sites of Special Scientific Interest were established. The SSSIs were reviewed in 2000 leading to the amalgamation of five individual sites into a single Sefton Coast SSSI. Hesketh Golf Links SSSI to the north of Southport remains the only separate dune site.

The Ribble Estuary receives protection as a SSSI for its importance to breeding, passage and over-wintering birds (part of the site lies within Sefton) and in 2000 the Mersey Narrows SSSI was notified for its value to waterbirds (part of the site also lies within Sefton).



The Sefton Coast is also a nationally important site for historic and active geomorphology. Ainsdale is notified as a Geological Conservation Review (GCR) site for its active coastal geomorphology, in particular the sand dunes and multiple sand bars on the foreshore. The Sefton Coast continues to attract scientific study of past environments and, as a result of recent research, both Formby Point (for the study of coastal change and for the important finds of human footprints) and Hightown (for the submerged forest and Neolithic trackway) are 'potential GCR sites' for their historic value.

SSSIs (and GCR sites) receive statutory protection through the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 empowered English Nature to

offer financial incentives for active management and the ability to enforce active management through management schemes and management notices.

In 2002 Government recognised the quality of the national sites as a key indicator of the health of the countryside. The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has set a challenging target, both to English Nature and other bodies such as the Environment Agency, the Forestry Commission and local authorities and approved bodies, to reach a 'Public Service Agreement' target of 95% of SSSIs in favourable condition by 2010.

This is in line with the support of all European Governments to "halt the loss of biodiversity by 2010". In the wake of this declaration the International Union for the Conservation of Nature has launched the 'Countdown 2010' campaign to strengthen the message. Recently the UK Government has re-confirmed its commitment to the process.

The initiatives that have been taken at the European level through the Birds Directive of 1979 and the Habitat Directive of 1992 support and strengthen the UK approach to nature conservation, adding an additional level of protection. The suite of 'European sites' now identified for the UK is based on the rigorous scientific approach for the selection of SSSIs and affords the highest level of protection. Currently there are discussions about a marine SPA for Liverpool Bay to protect the important populations of seabirds.

Local sites, known as Sites of Local Biological Interest (SLBI) and Sites of Local Geological/Geomorphological Interest (SLGI) give protection to biological interest and geomorphological interest outside the national sites: these are identified in the Unitary Development Plan for Sefton. Such sites will in future be reviewed on a County-wide basis.

A Red Squirrel refuge was established on the Sefton Coast in September 2005 as one of a series of national sites designed to assist the Red Squirrel in Britain. Grey Squirrels continue to threaten the existence of the native Red Squirrel in the UK. The Sefton population, estimated to be over 1000 adults, is recognised as one of the most important in England. The current national population is estimated to be 160,000, mainly in Scotland.

Sefton Council and the Sefton Coast Partnership support the protection of the biodiversity values of the Sefton Coast through, for example, endorsement of the Sefton Coast Management Plan (1999), Conservation Strategy for the Sefton Coast (1999) and Sefton Coast Woodlands Forest Plan (2003). The Sefton Coast Partnership is taking the lead with the current initiative, with financial support from Sefton Council and English Nature.

Summary of statutory designations

International

Ribble and Alt Estuaries Ramsar site (2002)

European

Sefton Coast Special Area of Conservation (2005)

Ribble and Alt Estuaries Special Protection Area (2002)

Mersey Narrows and North Wirral Shore potential SPA (and Ramsar site)
Potential Liverpool Bay Marine SPA

Collectively SAC and SPA sites form part of the Natura 2000 network of European protected sites

National

Sefton Coast SSSI (2000) –includes geological conservation review (GCR) site at Ainsdale
Hesketh Golf Links SSSI (1989)
Mersey Narrows SSSI (2000) (part in Sefton)
Ribble Estuary SSSI (1984)(part in Sefton)

Formby Point potential GCR site and Hightown potential GCR site for historic landforms

5 Obligations for management

In the UK national coordination of nature conservation policy is delegated to the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC). The JNCC, along with input from nature conservation agencies and experts, has developed Common Standards Monitoring which has been adopted by the country nature conservation agencies in their evaluation of habitat condition (see box below). CSM provides a standardised, robust framework for assessing the quality of the important wildlife (and geomorphology) of SSSIs (and European sites).

JNCC also supports the UK Government in its discussions with other EU Member States through the EU Habitats Committee. This Committee encourages a European overview to the selection of sites, their management and monitoring. For example, there are on-going discussions about the funding and monitoring of the Natura 2000 network.

Through these processes there are clear statements, backed up by scientific expertise, of the most important features of the sites along the Sefton Coast. Much of our management work is therefore directed to maintaining and enhancing the quality of these habitats. The ‘important features’ of each site are in the SSSI notification packages and there is now a duty to maintain these in favourable condition (or work towards their recovery).

Government Planning Policy (Planning Policy Statement 9: Biodiversity and Geological Conservation, 2005) sets out planning policies on protection of biodiversity and geological conservation through the planning system. The PPS advises local authorities on how to incorporate nature conservation into local policies and actions. Local Authority plans should now aim to enhance, as well as maintain, biological/geomorphological conservation interest.

Government planning guidance also requests regional spatial strategies to include biodiversity objectives, targets for restoration and recreation of priority habitats and the recovery of priority species populations, linked to national targets. At the local level the Sefton Community Strategy has targets for biodiversity.

The statutory processes under-pinning nature conservation give;

- A scientific view of the relative importance of the habitats and species of the Sefton Coast set against national, European and international criteria;
- A protective structure, based on UK approaches to nature conservation and UK domestic legislation, to ensure that planning and other activities pay due regard to the value of the sites.

Conservation Objectives

Conservation objectives will be prepared for all SSSIs, and include targets and attributes for all notified features, for all designations. The objectives allow the condition of a habitat or the population of a species to be measured against a standard national approach. Common Standards Monitoring is a rapid assessment method which sets out what makes a habitat or species in good (favourable) condition. Other habitats and species may occur on the site which are not notified features and conservation objectives are not written for these.

There are close links between this UK approach and the reporting requirements under the EU Habitats Directive.

Conservation objectives have been established for the intertidal features of the Sefton Coast through the Regulation 33 package. This relates to the marine part of the Ribble and Alt Estuaries SPA and the Sefton Coast SAC (only these parts, not the landward components, are the 'European marine site' under UK legislation).

Conservation objectives for the dune habitats and key species will be reviewed as part of the development of the revised conservation strategy.

6 Delivering the North Merseyside Biodiversity Action Plan on the Sefton Coast

An element of the revised nature conservation strategy will be the delivery of the actions for the coast identified through the local Biodiversity Action Plan. A Business and Communications Plan will be published in 2006: in this the Sefton Coast is identified as a strategic project.

Biodiversity initiatives are now well established and supported at all levels of Government. The current drive to tackle the losses of biodiversity, not just on protected sites but across the country as a whole, is supported by international conventions, European Directives and domestic legislation. In England the lead is given through the England Biodiversity Strategy. This sets out the series of actions to be taken by the Government and its partners to ensure that biodiversity considerations become embedded in all sectors of society.

Biodiversity conservation therefore has a political dimension and is led through a number of top-down strategies. It also has a local dimension where support is given to programmes and actions which seek to make biodiversity conservation relevant to people's lives. Nature conservation is increasingly being recognised as making a contribution to health and well-being. There is,

however, some way to go to show that biodiversity has clear social and economic benefits. There is still an assumption that the natural environment will look after itself or that this is a job that can be left to the specialists.

In North West England a regional audit of biodiversity was completed in 1999 and the Local Biodiversity Action Plan for North Merseyside was launched in 2000. This identifies a series of habitats and species characteristic of the area for which action will be required. Local biodiversity plans are well placed to help meet targets for the conservation of priority habitats and species with wider action for habitats and species which are part of the local area. The Merseyside plan includes actions for urban wildlife as well as for the rarer species of the coast.

Delivery is a joint effort between statutory organisations, land owners and managers and local communities. The action plans of the Merseyside Biodiversity Forum (the main meeting of key stakeholders) help to target resources for protection, monitoring and management of habitats and species. The Sefton Coast Partnership has offered to coordinate the delivery of these actions for the coast and does this through its task group structure. A number of funding streams are available to support this type of work; most favour strategic and coordinated projects.

Habitat and species action plans which wholly or partly cover the coastal area are given in the tables below. Further information can be found on the website www.nmbap.org.uk

Habitat Action Plans: North West England priority habitats given in bold	UK Broad Habitat category	Notes
Coastal saltmarsh	Saltmarsh	Small area at the Alt Estuary. Main areas north of Southport in Ribble Estuary
Lowland mixed broadleaf woodland	Broadleaved, mixed and yew woodlands	Small pockets of dune woodland may fall into this category
Wet Woodland	Broadleaved, mixed and yew woodland	Small areas of alder woodlands develop in wet slack habitats
Coastal sand dune	Supralittoral sediment	Range of habitats from strandlines to dune scrub
Lowland heathland	Dwarf shrub heath	Main extent is found at Freshfield.
Conifer woodland	Coniferous woodland	Significant area including Red Squirrel refuge
Lowland dry acid grassland	Acid grasslands	Towards the rear of the dune system in association with heathland habitats
Ponds	Standing open water and canals	A number of water-bodies hold water all year round. The largest is Sands lake at Ainsdale.
Reedbeds	Fens, marsh and swamp	Possible development of reedbed at Marshside. Reed also a component of the developing marsh habitat at Birkdale.

Species action plans	National (priority) /local	
Bats	Priority	Bats use the woodland edge habitat and feed out into main dune area
Red Squirrel	Priority	Coastal pinewoods lie at the heart of the Red Squirrel refuge.
Brown Hare	Priority	Grassland and farmland surrounding dune system, especially at Hightown and Altcar Rifle Ranges
Water Vole	Priority	Few records from the coast. Present on outer limits at Freshfield Dune Heath. Drainage ditches may allow expansion.
Skylark	Priority	Characteristic species of open dune grasslands–current concerns about decline
Natterjack Toad	Priority	Sefton Coast one of strongholds in UK
Sand Lizard	Priority	Rare and endangered –requires corridors and areas of bare sand.
Petalwort and rare mosses	Priority	Restricted to margins of dune slacks. Three rare priority mosses also included in plan.
Sefton Coast rare and scarce plants	Local	Dune Helleborine, Isle of Man Cabbage, Early Sand-grass, Hedge Bindweed (coastal sub-species), Grey Hair-grass, Smooth Rupturewort, Baltic Rush, Baltic Rush hybrids, Sharp Club-rush, Hybrid willows.
Purple Ramping-fumitory	Priority	Plant of sandy field margins –potential habitat on coast
Stonechat	Local	Characteristic species of open dune scrub
Lapwing	Local	Marshside, Ribble Estuary and farmland are important sites
Common Lizard	Local	Widespread but under-recorded
Great-crested Newt	Priority	Population centred around Ainsdale Sand Dunes NNR
Northern Dune Tiger Beetle	Priority	Characteristic species of mobile dunes
Sandhill Rustic Moth	Local	Species found on embryo dunes
Vernal Colletes Mining Bee	Local	Species found in dunes with creeping willow
Grayling	Local	Butterfly of the open dune areas
Dark-green Fritillary	Local	Butterfly of the open dune areas
Dragonflies	Local	Important populations found in permanent water bodies
Stoneworts	Local (one species priority)	Characteristic plants of clear water in dune ponds. Chara curta (Lesser Bearded Stonewort) is a priority species

A biodiversity delivery plan will be included in the nature conservation strategy. This will be linked to the targets for the maintenance of habitat extent and quality and for the restoration and expansion of habitats in the North West Region.

Expansion targets for north-west England by 2010 are for the re-establishment of 150ha of open dune vegetation lost to other land uses and erosion, for the re-establishment of 70ha of saltmarsh to replace part losses, for the re-establishment of 50ha of grazing marsh and for the re-establishment of 50ha of lowland heathland on suitable areas. The North Merseyside BAP has set a target for the restoration of 20ha of dune habitat by 2015.

The Sefton Coast biodiversity delivery plan will also support Regional Maritime Biodiversity Action Plans. Marine issues will be better addressed at a regional level. Future action plans for habitats such as intertidal sand and mudflats and saltmarsh and for species such as seabirds and cetaceans (whales and dolphins) will be developed through the North West Biodiversity Forum.

With potentially competing demands between different habitats and species there is a need to establish mechanisms to record wildlife, to share knowledge, to discuss and resolve potential conflicts and to coordinate reporting. There is a role here for contributions from habitat and species specialists, volunteer recorders, local groups and the wider community.

7 The Management Framework

The pattern of land ownership and land use on the Sefton Coast is now well established. In the twentieth Century a number of large estates were broken up and land was purchased by the National Trust, Nature Conservancy (English Nature) and Southport Corporation (now Sefton Council).

In the early 1990s these three bodies were the main conservation land managers on the dune coast and led on the preparation of the conservation strategy for the sand dunes of the Sefton Coast (1999). From the early 1990s conservation efforts were also increasingly supported by the military sites (at Altcar and Woodvale) and by the golf courses. Both RSPB and Lancashire Wildlife Trust now have significant management interests on the coast.

The Sefton Coast Management Scheme was established in 1978. In 2000 the arrangements were reviewed. The Sefton Coast Partnership was formed to broaden the representation of stakeholders on the decision making and working groups. A wide community of interest is maintained through the Board, Working Group, task groups, an annual Forum, a website www.seftoncoast.org.uk and Coastlines newsletter.

Overall guidance for the management of the coast is set out in the Sefton Coast Management Plan (the current document covers the period 1997-2006). The plan sets out the need for the management to address landscape, nature conservation, recreation and coastal defence in a coordinated manner.

8 Description of the current situation –condition monitoring

The main habitats on the Sefton Coast are intertidal foreshores, salt- and freshwater marshes and dunes (including woodland, grassland and heath). The status of the notified features of the protected sites is monitored by English Nature using the common standards approach developed at UK level as explained above. Some habitats, such as the pinewoods and acid grassland, are not monitored through this system, although they may be monitored as supporting habitat for

notified species. Condition monitoring also includes the geomorphological features for which the site is notified

The most up-to-date assessment is that the foreshore habitats of the Sefton Coast are in good condition, including the Mersey Narrows. There is no evidence of deterioration of the habitat or its value for birds. Sefton Council's draft Beach Management Plan provides a management tool to ensure that the internationally important assemblages of breeding, passage and over-wintering birds are not unduly disturbed and that beach management activities do not compromise the natural development of early stages of dune and marsh development. The draft beach management plan and its associated consultation group provides the rationale for a cooperative approach to resource management.

The Ribble Estuary and the RSPB Marshside Nature Reserve are also considered to be in good condition.

The situation is much more complicated on the dune system and overall there are several concerns about a decline in habitat diversity and quality. Conservation management practices applied to areas of the coast have been considered to be successful and the indication is that, given sufficient resources and support, the dune system can be brought into good condition and maintained in that state.

Management practice such as the control of invasive scrub (mainly Sea Buckthorn), mowing of meadows and slacks and grazing appear to be slowing or stopping some of the detrimental trends. The re-introduction of what could be considered to be more traditional management practices has been shown to improve habitat quality and diversity. There is now considerable experience within the conservation management bodies of setting sustainable management regimes. There are good examples elsewhere of sand dune areas grazed for several centuries without losing their value for nature. There is therefore a cultural link between the creation of habitats such as dune heath and its conservation today.

Despite the reports of biodiversity loss across the UK the Sefton Coast would appear to have maintained its value. The Sefton Coast Partnership is optimistic about the future for wildlife but is aware that problems may lie ahead. Forward planning and adaptability will become increasingly necessary. Nature conservation will need clear objectives, co-management and sustained funding.

9 Key Issues

Climate change

Addressing the future impacts of now inevitable climate change on the distribution of habitats and species is likely to be the greatest challenge for nature conservation in the 21st Century. Over the last 100 years global temperatures have risen by about 0.7 C and in central England the 1990s was the warmest decade since records began. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has concluded that most of the warming observed over the last 50 years is likely to be because of increasing concentrations of greenhouse gases due to human activity.

The introduction to the Government's current consultation on an 'Adaptation Policy Framework' states "that it is now widely accepted that some degree of climate change is inevitable, regardless of our efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Therefore some adaptation is needed".

Predictions of climate change must therefore underpin much of the medium to long-term thinking about coastal management.

Current predictions indicate that by the 2080s the annual average temperatures in the UK are expected to rise by 2-3 degrees Centigrade but could be as much as 5 degrees C. Habitats and species will need to be given the space to allow movement along corridors; rigid site boundaries will be no guarantee of security for some habitats and species. The sensitivity, adaptability and vulnerability of habitats and species will be determining factors in their survival.

Global sea-levels are rising and are predicted to be 4-14 cm higher than the 1961-1990 average by 2020 and 9-69 cm higher by 2080. The range in the figures is based on the IPCC low emissions scenario and high emissions scenario.

Not only are global temperatures rising, predictions for north-west England include more frequent summer droughts, wetter winters, increased storminess and extreme weather events. Such factors will have to be considered in any 50-100 vision for the Sefton Coast.

The concept of 'adaptable management' will need to be adopted by land managers: working with the underlying processes (geomorphology and hydrology), maintaining habitat diversity, protecting soils, creating buffer zones and developing strategies for invasive species.

We will continue to see changes to the mix and distribution of species on the Sefton Coast. For example some of the more 'northern' species may retreat to be replaced by 'southern' species. Already we have noted a number of southern insects expanding northwards. These include a number of dragonfly (e.g. Emperor Dragonfly) and butterfly (e.g. Speckled Wood) species which add interest to the area. However, the situation is complex and possible major changes in the movement of bird species or in the food webs in the ecosystem are not easy to model. Climate change may also result in some benefits and opportunities depending on the approach to adaptation.

Provided that adaptable management can be implemented the impact of climate change should not diminish the relative importance of the Sefton Coast for nature conservation. So it is not the case, at present, that any great losses are expected although some vulnerable species and habitats may be put at more risk.

Nutrient deposition

Ecologists are increasingly concerned about the medium to long-term effects of nitrogen deposition on habitats and ecosystems. Atmospheric pollution arising from sources such as power stations and vehicle emissions is increasing the level of nutrients in rainfall. This can affect all habitats and there is evidence to show that the input of nitrogen to the dune habitats is now at a critical level.

All habitats have a 'nitrogen budget' with inputs from the atmosphere and groundwater, storage (pools) in soil and vegetation and losses by leaching and grazing activity. Dune grassland as a habitat naturally has significantly less nitrogen in its soil and vegetation than coarse grassland. So, if the amount of nitrogen begins to increase in the soil it will trigger a change in the type of grassland. We think that this process is now affecting the Sefton Coast.

On the Sefton Coast about 13 kilograms of Nitrogen are deposited on every hectare each year. Ecologists have identified 'critical loads' of between 10 and 20 kg N/ha/year, above which vegetation change may occur, so we are now in this zone. The situation requires monitoring. Although the UK Government has reported significant reductions in Sulphur dioxide emissions (from the burning of fuel), and Nitrogen oxide emissions, levels are still above the EU National Emissions Ceiling Directive targets.

Trends in climate change, nutrient deposition and acidification need to be taken into consideration in long-term objectives. We could not predict the consequences of changing climates by only studying the Sefton Coast. There is a need to take part in wider studies to help set the Sefton Coast in its geographical position. In 2005 the Ainsdale Sand Dunes National Nature Reserve joined a climate change study coordinated by English Nature and the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (Modelling Natural Resource Responses to Climate Change).

Current issues

The current issues facing the main conservation land managers are;

Coastal change

Ongoing coastal change is leading to both losses and gains of habitats. New habitat is forming at Southport, Birkdale and Crosby whilst at Formby the mobile dunes are migrating landwards in response to coast erosion. Whilst generally perceived to be a positive and natural aspect of the coast, erosion will inevitably lead to some habitats being 'squeezed' by advancing mobile dunes from the west and scrub development from the east. The landward movement of habitats in response to coastal change is constrained by the inland residential areas and infrastructure.

Natural geomorphological processes

The nature of the beaches, saltmarshes and dunes depends on continuity of natural geomorphological processes. Wind-dominated processes are important for the formation of dunes, blowouts and slacks. The changes observed to the distribution of plant communities on the coast suggest that the dunes are becoming increasingly stable. Reasons may be part of a natural cycle but also partly a result of shelter effects, active stabilisation and nutrient deposition.

Trends in plant communities

From surveys there appears to be a general observation of increased vegetation growth leading to the loss of younger more open habitats and the replacement of species-rich dune grassland by coarse grassland. Ecological succession from open habitats to more closed habitats is a natural and cyclical process but the ability of the dune system to provide the younger habitats in this succession may be affected by factors such as nutrient deposition and falling water tables.

Fragmentation

The extent and connectivity of habitats on the Sefton Coast has been significantly altered by the consequences of fragmentation. There are some natural features, such as the River Alt, which act as barriers for some species but it is mainly the presence of transport infrastructure, residential development, plantation woodlands and sea defence structures which has broken up the coast into a series of units. Some of these, such as small outlying fragments of the dune system are particularly vulnerable to damage.

Water resources

Several habitats and species on the Sefton Coast are dependant on natural fluctuations in water levels and water quality. The natural groundwater reservoir is an integral element of the dune ecosystem. There are concerns about the water budget of the dunes and the impact of drainage, abstraction and draw-down from plantations. Some slack habitats are also becoming more overgrown with scrub and grasses.

The cumulative impact of human use

There is a need to address the cumulative impact of the human use of the coast for settlement, industry, recreation and transport. All these uses place pressures on the remaining natural habitats through actions such as coastal defence, water abstraction, drainage, trampling, pollution, introduction of problem species and disturbance.

Management at the landscape and ecosystem level

Management for nature needs to be considered at the landscape and ecosystem level and over long time periods. The Sefton Coast Partnership will be adopting the guidelines to integrated coastal zone management (ICZM) in the preparation of a revised plan. This will help to set the Sefton Coast in a regional, national and international context. There are strong links between the history and cultural use of the coast, the present landscape and wildlife.

Communication

Land managers recognise the challenges in meeting nature conservation obligations whilst also trying to meet the expectations of local communities and visitors. An open approach to communication will be important to raise the overall level of understanding about nature conservation. The reasons for any observed changes need to be better understood. Management needs to be under-pinned by evidence so that the right decisions can be made.

How we value nature will always be subjective. Our differing perceptions and values may lead to misunderstandings, different stances and conflict. The process of developing a revised nature conservation strategy must recognise this but also seek to resolve disputes through a consensus building process.

The nature conservation strategy will be founded on discussions and consultations to, as far as is practicable, achieve a shared perception of the issues affecting the Sefton Coast, shared understanding of the reasons for the observed changes and the development of shared solutions.

Key Issue 1 –Coastal Change

The Sefton Coast always has been and always will be in a state of change. This is natural. Whilst long-term climatic and sea-level changes will ultimately determine the coastal position the modern coastline can be much affected by human interference with coastal processes. Natural trends along the Sefton Coast may be affected by mineral extraction, navigational dredging, sea walls, barrages and dune building for coastal protection.

Current trends in sea-level have to be seen against the background of relative land/sea level changes due to the ongoing trends in vertical land movements which followed the most recent glaciation (much of southern Britain is sinking and much of northern Britain rising). The Sefton Coast lies on one of the hinge points where very little uplift or subsidence is recorded. Figures recently updated by the UKCIP show for the north west of England the predicted sea level 1-11 cm higher by 2020 and 3-63 cm higher by 2080.

At the local level the most important factor will be perhaps the availability of coastal sediment – at present there is a net onshore movement of sediment to the Mersey and Ribble estuaries and the development of saltmarsh habitat in the Ribble estuary has managed to keep pace with sea level rises. Continued local and regional monitoring work is therefore crucial to be able to plan for future coastal change.

The natural dynamic of the near-shore zone, beaches, estuaries and embryo dunes appears to be functioning well and, in the medium-term, these habitats are well placed to adapt to sea-level rise and predicted increases in storminess. The coastline at Southport, Birkdale and Crosby continues to accrete, with increasing marsh and dune development and rising beach levels. Whilst this natural development gives rise to concerns from a tourism and amenity perspectives nature is providing an additional level of coast protection. Set against the global predictions of rising sea levels this is a useful insurance policy.

At Formby Point erosion predominates and the current policy of land managers and Sefton Council (as Coast Protection Authority) is to allow the dune crest to ‘roll back’ in response to erosion thus maintaining a high dune barrier offering continued protection to the community of Formby. Here, as the frontal dunes roll back, there is a greater level of sand mobility than elsewhere on the coast. The mobile zone needs to be some 200m deep.

Key Issue 2 -working with natural processes

Public perception tends to perceive sand blow as ‘bad’ and stabilisation as ‘good’. This is reinforced by the experience of nuisance sand-blow: in fact much of the early work of the Sefton Coast Management Scheme was concerned with addressing these problems. But ecologists and geomorphologists now recognise mobile sand and bare sand patches as an important and integral part of the dune ‘system’. Throughout the twentieth Century there was a general natural trend towards dune stability; recreation pressure and other disturbances did counter this but we are now

seeing a much more stable dune system than even 20 years ago. Similar trends have been reported from other dune systems with impacts on vegetation communities (see Issue 3 below).

This has consequences for nature as many of the animals and plants of the dune system are adapted to more open conditions. The habitats on the Sefton Coast with disturbed ground and bare sand support the greatest number of plant species. Whilst there is no single cause for the observed stabilisation of the dunes, some possible reasons might include;

- The very open dune system of the early twentieth Century (as seen on early photographs) is becoming more vegetated with the development of scrub a natural consequence
- The balance of dune stabilising processes (e.g. soil and vegetation processes) maybe greater than the natural forces which would re-activate sand movement (drought, wind, grazing etc).
- The increase in nutrient deposition adds to the nutrient ‘pool’ in the soil favouring the growth of coarse vegetation which out-competes the lower growing dune vegetation.
- The reduction in grazing pressure following the decline of rabbit populations in the 1950s allowed the growth of tall vegetation and scrub.
- Some plants, Sea Buckthorn, for example, ‘fix’ atmospheric nitrogen adding to the nutrient pool in the soil.

Conservation land managers may wish to counter this trend by encouraging more open sand throughout the dune system, especially the natural formation of blowouts which in turn lead to the development of wet slacks. Such an objective would be in keeping with the recognised importance of the Sefton Coast for the conservation of geomorphological processes.

Some of the negative changes to vegetation communities discussed below could be countered by ‘gardening’ –e.g. stripping back layers of turf to get to a younger successional stage. Further discussion on this issue, however, needs to consider the value of working more at the landscape level and with natural processes.

Key Issue 3 –Vegetation community change

It is often very difficult to ‘see’ change, yet the beaches, marshes and dunes are in a constant process of change; changes in geomorphology (the levels of beaches, height of dunes etc), soils (an unseen but significant process), vegetation communities and the distribution of individual species.

Conservation land managers take series of fixed-point photographs so they can compare the same views every 5 years. Photographs can show change but cannot analyse the reasons for change.

A more scientific technique has been developed through the UK National Vegetation Classification which assigns vegetation types to a ‘community’. Maps of vegetation types are

prepared and the information supported by detailed lists of species taken from selected sites. Surveys on the Sefton Coast have been carried out for the saltmarshes and dunes.

The dunes of the Sefton Coast were first surveyed in 1988-1989 and the work repeated in 2003-2004. The results show broad-scale changes in vegetation community types over the 15 year period. Natural trends would be expected. The results do show an increase in the ‘older’ communities of the coast and a decrease in the ‘younger’ communities. But the scale of the observed changes was unexpected, hinting at what could be termed accelerated succession.

The survey results will need further corroboration, analysis and discussion. The information shows that there has been a reduction in the more mobile habitats of the dune system matched by a increase in ‘semi-fixed’ habitat. The information appears to show a trend towards stabilisation and loss of diversity. The reduction of small patches of open dunes with low-growing annual plants and the colonisation of blowouts by the sand-binding Sand Sedge are seen as trends towards stabilisation.

Vegetation surveys can detect the impact of management: the coastwide control programme for Sea Buckthorn scrub has reduced the invasive scrub to more manageable levels and most of the cleared areas are returning to semi-fixed dune habitat. Management by grazing can also maintain the semi-fixed dunes in a more open state.

Description (and NVC category)	1989 (hectares)	2004 (hectares)	Change
Mobile dunes with Sea Lyme Grass (SD5)	19.3	5.4	-72%
Mobile dunes with Marram Grass (SD6)	123.6	95.1	-23%
Semi-fixed dunes with Marram and Red Fescue Grass (SD7)	339.6	465.6	+37%
Open dunes with small, low-growing annual plants, e.g. Sand Cat’s Tail Grass (SD19)	39.3	3.1	-92%
Dune grassland with Lady’s Bedstraw (SD8)	93.9	7.9	-92%
Blowouts with stabilising Sand Sedge (SD10)	4.1	41.8	+914%
Sea Buckthorn scrub (SD18) – following scrub control programme	39.3	3.1	-92%

The survey of the dune slack habitats shows a similar trend for the wetland habitats of the dune system. There has been a marked reduction in the vegetation associated with young and semi-mature slacks matched by an increase in the older slacks dominated by Creeping Willow and grasses. The succession of slack habitats from bare sand to mature scrub is a natural process: what the survey appears to show is that new slacks are not forming naturally at a sufficient rate to replace older slacks. There is a balance, however: the rapid accretion of new dune and wetland communities at Birkdale in recent years (mapped in the saltmarsh survey) is providing a large area of new habitat. Since 1985 the ‘green beach’ habitats at Birkdale have grown to 62 ha and the area continues to expand and increase in species-richness.

Description	1989 (hectares)	2004 (hectares)	Change
Edge vegetation of young slacks-good for Petalwort (SD13)	7.6	0.1	-98%
Semi-mature slacks (SD15)	54.8	34.6	-37%
Grassy slacks with Creeping Willow (SD16)	46.8	59.0	+26%* figure also includes dunes with Creeping Willow

Key Issue 4 –Fragmentation

The fragmentation of habitats, and isolation of species, is a particular threat to the nature of the Sefton Coast –more so than for the other major dune system in the UK. With much of the original dune area developed some small areas now remain as outliers to the main dune system (Queens Jubilee Nature Trail, Kenilworth Road dunes etc). Problems of scrub development, vulnerability of isolated populations, recreation pressure and tipping of garden waste put these sites into the high-risk category. The nature conservation strategy will give equal attention to these sites. The Forest Plan highlights the need for corridors to assist the movement of Red Squirrels. Similar approaches are required to re-connect isolated populations of Sand Lizard and other species.

Potential areas for the restoration or re-creation of habitats or the re-introduction of species will be identified through the ongoing nature of the strategy. The 1999 conservation strategy identified some of the main fragmenting features affecting the dune coast along with possible actions to reduce the impact.

Here on the Sefton Coast, and elsewhere in the UK and north-west Europe, there is now considerable experience of the restoration of coastal habitats. Restoration practice has included the excavation and re-profiling of slack habitat mainly as a breeding site for Natterjack Toad, the removal of invasive scrub and follow-up management by grazing, and the restoration of open dune landscapes by the removal of scrub and woodland. English Nature’s dune restoration project at Ainsdale Sand Dunes National Nature Reserve has highlighted some of the key issues that need to be addressed in managing the coast. The conservation strategy will set such projects in the broader context of the Sefton Coast.

Key Issue 5 -Water resources

The conservation of natural water resources is crucial to many of the sites along the Sefton Coast including the wet grasslands of Marshside and the Ribble, the dune slacks of the Sefton Coast and the range of permanent water bodies. Water quality, quantity and seasonal fluctuations are all important.

Natural ‘slacks’ on the Sefton Coast originate as wind-scoured gaps in the mobile dune zone and as blow-outs in the fixed dune landscape. The wind can carve through dry sand but cannot move wet sand leading to flat features in the dunes where the under-lying water table is reached. The length, width and depth of the sand of the Sefton Coast contains a rain-fed domed aquifer, the highest point of which is roughly along the line of the Liverpool-Southport railway. From this

high point water drains off both seawards through the dune system and landwards into the drainage system feeding the Alt and Crossens catchments.

Dune water is 'as pure as rainwater'. However, the quality of rainfall, that we take for granted, has become increasingly polluted with nitrous oxides and sulphur compounds. The clear waters of dune pools support a wealth of wildlife including rare species of stoneworts, typical algal plants of shallow clear waters. These, and other species, would be at risk from the acidification and eutrophication of waters.

There is a natural seasonal fluctuation of the dune water table from high levels in early spring to low levels by the end of the summer. There are also longer cycles of 7-10 years from 'dry years' to 'wet years'. Both sets of fluctuation are necessary to the health of the dune system. Periods of low water levels allow the wind to cut deeper into the mobile dunes to create the new slacks of future years: wet years ensure the successful breeding of Natterjack Toad, a species well adapted to long periods of drought. Both extremes, sustained over time, are vital for the dune system.

So, how will this balance be affected by climate change predictions? In the north-west of England the average summer rainfall may decrease by 10-15% by the 2020s and by 20-40% by the 2080s. Average winter rainfall may increase by 10% by the 2020s and by 15-26% by the 2080s. The pattern of rainfall may also change with more intense rainfall in winter and the contrast between summer and winter conditions becoming more pronounced.

The natural water balance of the Sefton Coast is already compromised by drainage and abstraction (see Issue 6 below). Whilst the abstraction licences of the golf courses are carefully assessed by both the Environment Agency and English Nature to ensure that impacts are minimal there is less control on drainage from the dune system. RSPB carefully controls its drainage regime at Marshside to maximise the value of the site for wintering and breeding birds. The drains on the dune system are less well understood and there is not an overall plan. Drainage is required at times of the year by golf courses, the highways and railway to prevent flooding, whilst some land managers may want to hold water back for conservation purposes. Drainage outfalls have helped to develop a series of linear 'slacks' between the beach and the main dunes at Birkdale.

The pinewoods and scrub also act to draw down the water table and this effect may increase with warmer summers. It is suggested that pine plantations can draw down water levels by 30cm within a 100m radius of the woodland. In wet and damp slacks the amount of evapotranspiration (the loss of water from plants) is known to be greater in scrub than in herbaceous vegetation: so scrub removal does not result in a lowering of the water table. For wet slack habitats a draw down of even a few centimetres can make the difference between a successful breeding season or failure for the Natterjack Toad. Rare plants, such as the liverwort Petalwort may also be affected.

We need to increase our understanding of what the natural situation should be, identify the constraints to that ideal and take steps, as necessary to manage the situation to as close to natural as possible. Such work will now be undertaken in light of the EU Water Framework Directive which identifies wet slacks as groundwater dependant terrestrial ecosystems requiring special protection. A detailed study of the eco-hydrology of dune slacks will be published by English Nature and the Environment Agency in 2006.

Key Issue 6 –addressing the impact of human use of the coast

The Sefton Coast continues to be significantly affected by the cumulative effect of human activities. Fortunately, nature is resilient. The present character of the coast is hardly natural, yet most of the wildlife which could be considered to be characteristic of natural coastal areas continues to thrive. But although the species count may remain good and all expected habitats can be found there are many pressures acting on the ecosystem which may slowly reduce the ability of the area to adapt to change and isolated fragments of habitats may continue to deteriorate.

There is a need, however, to reduce problems as far as possible and to work towards win-win outcomes with land uses such as golf and the general use of the coast for sport and recreation. Sustainable tourism is compatible with nature conservation and the Sefton Coast Partnership will encourage those activities which are either neutral or of benefit to the conservation value of the coast.

Amongst the problems are concerns about the increasing use of the coast, which, if not well managed could lead to over-use in some areas. Some climate-change scenarios predict an increasing popularity of the open coast and beaches.

A specific problem for wildlife is introduced by dogs. Uncontrolled dogs can be very disturbing to flocks of waders and may reduce the breeding success of duneland birds. Dog fouling causes localised enrichment of dune soils. In some areas there may be a need to introduce tighter control under UK legislation.

Golf courses have a key role to play in conservation. The seven links courses along the Sefton Coast occupy about 25% of the total dune area and contain large areas of dune grassland, heath, scrub and slacks. Each course has a conservation management plan and takes ecological advice on their management. In reviewing the strategy we will look at the value of new initiatives such as the English Golf Environment Award in promoting good practice.

The nature conservation strategy will work closely with the initiatives for access, tourism and interpretation to ensure that there is an appropriate balance and that monitoring systems are introduced to act as early-warning of potential problems. In most cases of potential conflict the importance of the Sefton Coast for nature will generally take precedence.

Key Issue 7 -Integrated land management –an ecosystems approach

The Sefton Coast Management Scheme and the Sefton Coast Partnership have guided an integrated approach to land management, taking into consideration the interests of coast defence, access and recreation, nature conservation and woodland management. From a nature conservation perspective an ecosystems approach helps to set the Sefton Coast in a wider perspective –looking at the links to Liverpool Bay, the West Lancashire mosslands and the North West Region.

From a landscape perspective the Sefton Coast is an unique 'character area' with an underlying landscape of foreshore, coastal marshland, dunes and dune backlands on which more recent land-uses have been superimposed. The term 'forest' in relation to the Mersey Forest implies the conservation of the landscape of dunes, woods, agricultural grasslands and heaths which characterise the coast. The nature conservation strategy will support the conservation of the landscape features of the coast and will recognise the landscape and cultural value of the area.

Nature conservation interests cover the whole coastal area and include the corridors and connections into the urban areas, across potential barriers such as roads and the railway and along linear features such as the railway corridor.

The pinewoods of the Sefton Coast are a significant feature of the landscape. These are plantation woodlands, most dating from the late nineteenth Century to the early twentieth Century (but now with a significant proportion of new woodland). The work of the Sefton Coast Management Scheme led to the development of the Sefton Coast Woodlands Forest Plan in partnership with The Mersey Forest. The plan was adopted in 2003 and sets out detailed prescriptions for woodland management over a first five year period. The aims are to improve the woodland age structure and to support, in particular, the conservation needs of the Red Squirrel population.

The Forest Plan is a conservation tool and it will be incorporated within the overall nature conservation strategy. Across the coast there will always be a pattern of open habitats, scrub and woodland forming strong elements in the landscape. Changes in the pattern will occur over time. The overall landscape character, however, will remain. It is clear that some areas of plantation cannot be re-planted where they are now too close to the shore; the various woodland management strategies since the mid-1970s have sought to strengthen the 'rear woodlands' and to establish connections between woodlands.

Key Issue 8 – Communication

The Sefton Coast Partnership can help to provide a focus for discussion on nature conservation issues. The role of such partnerships is supported by bodies such as English Nature through their policies for coastal areas.

The complexity of nature conservation issues is such that there is a continual learning process about the interactions of species at the habitat and ecosystem level. Improved and ongoing communication between scientists and managers will be important. Nature conservation management practice also continues to adapt as a result of local experience and wider knowledge.

Several local initiatives aim to support communication about nature: the Sefton Borough Partnership (through the Community Strategy), Sefton Council, Merseyside Biodiversity Forum, and Mersey Forest etc. Work has also been completed through the Communications, Interpretation and Product Development Strategy for the Sefton Coast (CIPD Strategy). A number of interpretive themes and locations have been identified. The strap-line 'Sefton's Natural Coastline' has been adopted to help promote the natural values of the coast to visitors.

The nature conservation strategy will provide the drive and support for the development of a number of the actions in the CIPD strategy. However, there is now an opportunity to better support the 'community of interest' in relation to nature conservation.

The Sefton Coast Partnership could develop its role to encourage and coordinate the recording of wildlife, to publish information on studies and to provide a forum for discussion on nature conservation. We believe that there is a large body of interested members of local communities, amateur naturalists, specialists and national and international experts who have a genuine interest in the nature of the dunes and estuaries. Nature is complex and there are inevitably differences of opinion and priority setting between different interests. Good open discussion needs to be encouraged recognising that sometimes difficult decisions have to be made.

10 Proposed Methodology and timescale

This report is based on the original report of the Issues Groups for the 1999 strategy, a review of the 1999 strategy and current information, discussions with land managers and statutory agencies and input from the SCP Board, Working Group and Nature Conservation Task Group. Minutes and key documents can be found on the nature conservation pages of the SCP website www.seftoncoast.org.uk

This report sets out the background to nature conservation: the designations, obligations and initiatives which guide the work and some of the issues which need to be addressed. The key issues are outlined to stimulate further discussion; they, along with the proposed principles (see below), will be modified, re-sorted, re-worded and improved through the involvement of advisers and stakeholder groups. From the working groups and other discussions a set of common objectives for nature conservation will be produced to be taken forward into the preparation of the strategy and work programme. (There may need to be some care with terminology: Conservation Objectives as explained above are the statutory basis for monitoring the condition of SSSI features, objectives linked to the nature conservation strategy will be a result of discussions on problems and possible solutions.)

The process of preparing the strategy and action plan will follow recent guidance 'Management Planning for Protected Areas'. This adopts the approach of consensus building used on the Sefton Coast and focuses on a shared approach to the identification of problems and working towards shared solutions.

Initial consultation will be taken through three routes. The Issues Report, summary and consultation form will be published on the SCP web-pages for public comment, sent to key stakeholders for formal comment and used as the background document for a number of stakeholder consensus-building workshops.

Four thematic workshops are planned to address;

1. habitat and species conservation,
2. coastal change, geomorphological processes and soil development,
3. conservation of water resources, water management issues and water quality issues and

4. Integrated management including an ecosystems approach, land-use, woodland management, archaeology and landscape character.

These broad subject areas will help to select invited stakeholders to contribute to the workshops. Links between the subject areas will be made through cross-cutting issues such as climate change and biodiversity action plan targets. The integrated management workshop will take the lead on developing a 50 year vision for the coast. Each workshop will be led by an invited convenor with two meetings and a field visit to develop common perceptions, identify the problems and issues and propose common solutions. Stakeholders are people who are interested in or are affected by the management of the Sefton Coast.

Stakeholders include;

Those who will benefit or be affected by the strategy
Those who might be able to help, delay or hinder the strategy
Those who have skills, money or resources
Those who are in a position to decide to go ahead with proposals

Initial public comments on the consultation made via the website will be summarised and given to the second meeting of each workshop so that a wide range of views can be considered. An acknowledgement and response will also be sent to all respondents.

The initial participatory consultation phase will be drawn together at a wider workshop in mid 2006 to set the approach for the development of the draft nature conservation strategy. This will bring together the deliberations of the working groups, the responses from formal consultees, advice from English Nature on conservation objectives, the views of the Sefton Coast Research Forum, the views of the Merseyside Biodiversity Forum and strategy advisers. From this stage the strategy should be able to proceed with agreed principles and common objectives, endorsed by the Sefton Coast Partnership.

A wider public consultation will be undertaken once the Sefton Coast Partnership has set out its preferred objectives for nature conservation. The SCP needs to have clear objectives to meet the targets set by the UK Government for nature conservation and to begin the response to the challenges of climate change.

Whilst the process will need to be adaptable there is still a need to know where we are going. Thus the long-term visions (50-100 years) support medium-term objectives (5-10 years) and annual (1-3 year) rolling work programmes. The annual work programmes will be consistent with the site-by-site work programmes prepared by land managers.

11 Agreeing principles and developing objectives

Management principles should be designed to be clearly understood and long-lasting. They set out the basic 'ground-rules' to be endorsed by the Sefton Coast Partnership. Although everyone may not agree with some of the elements of the management principles, their endorsement at the partnership level is a vital first stage in the development of the nature conservation strategy.

The nature conservation strategy supports the overall vision for the Sefton Coast which is;

“To manage and promote access to the coast, in a way which ensures the conservation of one of the most important coastal areas in Europe for nature, whilst providing sustainable benefits for the economy and for people.

- Specifically, we accept the joint responsibility to ensure that the integrity and natural value of the dune system and estuaries is protected in perpetuity as one of the series of European nature sites.”

Sefton Coast Partnership (ICZM) Business Plan - Vision Statement 2006

The draft set of principles for the nature conservation strategy are based on;

A coastwide approach

To adopt an ecosystems approach to nature conservation –looking at the beaches, saltmarshes and dunes and the processes acting on them as a ‘system’ rather than a set of individual habitats and species. To better understand the issues and threats to see this system in its wider regional, national and international context.

Working with nature-adaptability

To work with the grain of nature, allowing nature to take its course wherever possible and desirable and to manage positively for this. To manage for the long term, in the context of predicted climate change and other environmental influences. To accept that, in some cases, habitats and species will be lost, changed or replaced over time.

Working with coastal processes –a dynamic approach

To conserve active processes by non-intervention as far as possible, accepting coastal change and providing space for natural adaptation. We recognise that some constraints to this approach may be set by conservation objectives where priority habitats and species require in-situ conservation or by over-riding socio-economic needs.

Active management -continuity

To conserve the important habitats of the coast through active, adaptive and sustainable management of the marshes, heaths, fixed dunes and woodlands. To understand the cultural value of semi-natural habitats.

Restoration

To identify opportunities for the restoration of processes, natural hydrology, habitats and species, acting to reduce the impacts of fragmentation and providing corridors for the movement of habitats and species. To increase the resilience of coastal habitats and species to change.

Involvement

To involve local communities in developing solutions to conservation challenges. To share information on the state of nature. To support partners' in the dissemination of information about their coastal policies. To promote nature as a source of inspiration, enjoyment and learning for local people, visitors and wildlife specialists.

Based on a set of principles the land management and decision making bodies within the Sefton Coast partnership will be able to develop their objectives for management. Objectives should also be seen as coastwide rather than site specific.

Future conservation actions, whether for the maintenance, enhancement or re-creation of habitats should be seen to fit with principles and objectives. At the next level come the methods for management which can be more site specific and site based.

12 Outcomes

The production of the nature conservation strategy should lead to a number of outcomes. These may include;

- The delivery of a coordinated programme of action for biodiversity for the Sefton Coast, which will,
- Confirm and meet relevant national and local targets for habitat and species conservation;
- A stronger partnership with an agreed, and widely understood, set of principles for nature conservation;
- A set of clear objectives for nature conservation –supporting a rolling delivery plan;
- Greater public interest and involvement in nature conservation issues; and
- Better support to a nature conservation 'community of interest' –the amateur naturalists, specialists and scientists

References and notes

Climate change

The UK Climate Impacts Programme includes information on current climate, future predictions, along with climate change impacts and adaptation. www.ukcip.org.uk . Relevant projects include RegIS and MONARCH.

Climate change and the visitor economy in England's northwest. Information on www.snw.org.uk/tourism

General introduction to issues: see www.climatechallenge.gov.uk

Biodiversity

Biodiversity at EU level. See information on <http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment>

UK Biodiversity Action Plan and UK Biodiversity Partnership www.ukbap.org.uk

England Biodiversity Strategy 'Working with the grain of Nature' For a summary see www.english-nature.org.uk/about/pdf/EBSObjectives.pdf For full document see www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/biodiversity/biostrat/index.htm

North West Region biodiversity targets: see www.biodiversitynw.org.uk/

North Merseyside Biodiversity Action Plan www.merseysidebiodiversity.org.uk

International campaign Countdown 2010 www.countdown2010.net

What is the ecosystems approach? See, for example, www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/natres/millennium-ecosystem.htm