

**Sefton Coast Partnership
Nature Conservation Strategy**

Working Group: Habitats and Species

2 May 2006

Present:

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Steve White	Lancashire Wildlife Trust (co-leader)
Alice Kimpton	English Nature (co-leader)
Philip Smith	Lancashire Wildlife Trust
Rachael Parks	Red Alert
Pete Gahan	Sefton Council Leisure Services
Mike Downey	English Nature (notes)
John Houston	Sefton Coast Partnership
Sally Ann Tatlock	National Trust
Alan Burton	Formby Civic Society
Stephen Judd	National Museums Liverpool
Mark Bennett	Red Alert North West
Les Baxter	English Nature -volunteer
Nick Roche	The Mersey Forest
Billy Haizelden	Sefton Council, Leisure Services
Rachel Northover	Sefton Council, Leisure Services
Lesley Cryer	Action Ribble Estuary / Mersey Basin Campaign
Dave Earl	BSBI
Fiona Robertson	Lancashire Wildlife Trust
Dave Fletcher	South West Lancs Ringing Group
Guy Knight	National Museums Liverpool
John Gramauskas	Sefton Council, Leisure Services
Steve Cross	National Museums Liverpool

Background introduction

AK Sefton Coast is of Local, National and International importance for wildlife. The legislative frameworks for nature conservation focus on dune related features. There are statutory duties for land managers to preserve the biodiversity of priority habitats. There have been significant changes in National Vegetation Classification (NVC) types over the past 20 years. Future change is likely to be driven by 3 major factors – nutrient deposition, fragmentation and climate change.

SW There are certain key species on the coast around which habitat management has revolved:

Red Squirrel – main focus as far as the public are concerned. Very good, well established monitoring programme. Population fluctuates but is essentially stable. Sefton Coast Woodlands Forest Plan is very focused on delivering red squirrel conservation targets.

Bats – Little information available, but this is being addressed.

Birds – The intertidal area is designated as a Special Protection Area (SPA), and is well monitored. Populations are broadly stable or increasing, with the success of management through beach zoning and reducing car disturbance. The dunes and pinewoods are of local importance only for bird fauna.

Natterjack Toad – Populations fluctuate, but seem stable or increasing. Localised problem areas. Some potential problems need to be addressed, notably fragmentation, particularly at the extremities.

Sand Lizard – Stable populations, may well be larger than we think. Fragmentation of habitat more relevant due to poor mobility and colonization. Disturbance issues may also have an effect.

Great Crested Newt – Stable or increasing, no perceived threat to populations.

Plants – very good knowledge of species, with no significant recent losses. BAP species seem to be doing OK.

Invertebrates – little specialist knowledge amongst land managers. Action Plans exist for 5 species. The main 6 - 10 recognised important species seem to be doing OK.

Note: the Working Group discussions have been grouped as appropriately as possible and summarised. In some cases issues have been flagged up without being able to be answered or resolved by the group at this time. Due to the complex nature of the round-the-table discussions, comments or questions have not been directly attributed to people. Issues raised in the discussion do not imply that the group found consensus –further discussions will take place on field visits and future meetings.

What do we want to happen? How can that be evaluated and managed?

Regional targets are set in the North Merseyside Biodiversity Action Plan. Habitats are also evaluated through SSSI condition monitoring. Targets which arise from condition monitoring are the most objective way to evaluate habitats and species. Although these targets shouldn't necessarily be seen as the be-all-and-end-all, they should be used as the basis to inform habitat, ecosystem, and landscape based management aims and objectives.

There needs to be an agreed and partnership-led support of targets – in so far as they are not just seen to be 'dictated' by English Nature at a national level, but targets are agreed and supported across the coast at a local level.

Stabilisation

There is not enough bare sand for many of the plants and rare invertebrates. Across the coast there is approximately 5 % bare sand, but ideally this should be nearer 25%. Mobilisation processes need to be re-invigorated. One third of our vascular plants depend on bare or disturbed ground.

There is a poor public perception of “destabilisation” and of blowing bare sand – how can this be addressed?

It was agreed that there is now sufficient secured management in place across the coast for localised and controlled destabilisation to be managed, without it resulting in the problems of too much blowing sand as occurred in the past.

Continuity and appropriateness of management

Many questions raised:

- Scrub management – there seems to be an emphasis on management of open dune and mature woodland, but where does scrub management fit in?
- Are we managing habitats or processes?
- What are the future implications of climate change?
- Would natural successional processes be acceptable in succeeding dune slacks to dune woodlands / scrub? Would this compromise favourable condition monitoring?
- This leads us back to the overriding importance of open dune and slack habitats.

It was seen as a question of balance – through the 1970’s and 1980’s there was too much scrub along the coast, but it is important to maintain an element of scrub as part of a dune succession. It is quite right to have scrub in the appropriate place, but can be extremely damaging to have it in the wrong place!

There are obviously restrictions on where there might be appropriate areas for many of these processes – i.e. managing for scrub and woodland succession, destabilisation / mobilisation of sand etc. The most likely candidate for these processes to be managed effectively would be on Ainsdale Sand Dunes NNR where there is a sufficient area available. It was also noted that Birkdale Green Beach is currently by far the most mobile party of the coastal dune system due to accretion processes.

With climate change it has been suggested that there would be a lowering of summer water tables – could this drying lead to a natural increase in wind blown sand? Would this be enough to create the necessary destabilisation?

Access

In the Draft Principles for the Nature Conservation Strategy, where is the reference to access, tourism, recreation etc? This appears to be low on the list of priorities, under Draft Principle 6 ‘Involvement’. It was noted that the Nature Conservation Strategy must be seen in the context of other SCP strategies, linking and operating with, for example, the Access strategy and Tourism strategy.

Increased access may create erosion and limited destabilisation, but disturbance and trampling issues can cause far more problems. Is disturbance from dogs in particular, along with fouling and nutrient enrichment, an issue? Are there alternative places for

dog walkers to go? Are there benefits in attracting dog walkers to the coast – i.e. education, wardening etc?

It is possible that the Countryside and Rights of Way Act may yet bring Open Access to the coast regardless, making this a very real issue which needs to be addressed.

Nutrient enrichment / nitrogen deposition

Monitoring is essential to evaluate the extent of the changes going on. As far as atmospheric nitrogen deposition is concerned, there is not a lot we can do to tackle the source, so how do we need to go about managing the effects? This is a bit of an unknown factor, and would require experimental management and good monitoring. Turf stripping in old dry slacks dominated by creeping willow would be a possible starting point?

Coastal saltmarsh

Southport Pier and northwards, are there any projections on future saltmarsh development, and will this be addressed in the plan?

Monitoring

Bio Bank – recording and monitoring programme to inform the Merseyside Biological Records Centre. How does this work get prioritised and resourced? What are the priorities? Monitoring must inform management and be relevant and applicable. Clarification is needed on what we are actually trying to manage, i.e. are we managing coastal processes or are we managing coastal habitats? Need to be clear on what we are managing in order to prioritise monitoring efforts. Monitoring can be broad sweep (e.g. habitat mapping, NVC survey) or at the specific level (e.g. GPS spot locations).