



SEFTON COAST PARTNERSHIP NATURE CONSERVATION STRATEGY

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR WORKING GROUP: INTEGRATED LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT

Introduction

Conservation of nature in its broadest sense underpins the work of the Sefton Coast Partnership. A whole-landscape approach is promoted, accepting that whilst the distribution of elements may change over time, there should be no reduction in the overall value of the coast for the conservation of habitats and species, for coastal defence and for access and recreation.

From a landscape perspective the Sefton Coast is an unique 'character area' (recognised as such at the national level) with geomorphological units of foreshore, coastal marshland, dunes and dune backlands on which more recent land-uses have been superimposed. Much of the landscape is also of archaeological, historic and cultural significance showing the long association of people, landscape and wildlife. It should also be remembered that the term 'forest' in relation to the Mersey Forest implies the conservation of a mixed landscape of dunes, woods, agricultural grasslands and heaths. Other regional initiatives, such as the Mersey Waterfront Regional Park, recognise these elements of the landscape.

From a conservation perspective an ecosystems approach helps to set the Sefton Coast in context –looking at the links to Liverpool Bay, the West Lancashire mosslands and the North West Region. Links between sites are reinforced through the European Union's protected areas network –termed Natura 2000 (this encompasses the EU Special Protection Areas and Special Areas of Conservation). Natura 2000 is about people and nature and, at the local level, the Sefton Coast Partnership can help to make these connections.

Natural England, which will supersede English Nature in October 2006, will have a strong focus on people as part of nature, not apart from it. The vision is that;

"England....will support diverse, resilient and accessible landscapes, habitats and green spaces. They will be rich in wildlife, and contribute to our wealth and well-being. We want people to see themselves as part of nature and enjoy its benefits everywhere."

These sentiments fit well with the ethos of the Sefton Coast Partnership.

Land Uses

The Sefton Coast is an area of mixed land-uses. Remnants exist of former agricultural lands with some arable farming, asparagus cultivation and grazing of dune backlands and wet marshes. On several open dune areas grazing has been reintroduced as a management tool. Much of the coastal area is managed primarily for nature conservation, and there are also significant areas of golf course and military land. Private land-ownership is scattered throughout the coastal belt-many of these landowners have joined the Sefton Coast Woodlands Forest Plan.

Continuity of management

The coastal area benefits from continuity of management. With some remaining exceptions (e.g. private land at Hightown) most of the coastal land is under active management with security assured. This helps to underpin partnership activities such as the Sefton Coast Woodlands Forest Plan. In relation to the Sites of Special Scientific Interest this is also important as land managers can co-operate in working towards conservation targets.

Woodlands

The pinewoods of the Sefton Coast are a significant feature of the landscape. Most of the woodland resource was planted from the late nineteenth Century to the early twentieth Century. In recent decades, however, there has been a significant amount of new woodland planted along with active management to improve the quality of the existing woodlands. 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 set within an overall 20 year framework. 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 elements 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, should 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.

Access and Recreation

Landownership and land uses on the Sefton Coast determine the pattern of access and recreation uses. The natural zoning provided by strictly controlled areas (e.g. golf courses), permit areas (e.g. Ainsdale Sand Dunes NNR) and open access allows quiet areas for nature. Access provision has increased in recent decades and visitor usage is also increasing. There are plans for the development of three new visitor centres on the dune coast.

Whilst care must be taken not to allow the overuse of the coast (and consequent damage to natural resources) 'green tourism' is being promoted to encourage more visitors to walk, cycle and enjoy nature.

The management of most of the open sites on the coast involves a combination of nature conservation, access and promotion. The Sefton Coast Partnership promotes sustainability by balancing environmental, economic and social interests.

Tourism

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.

There is a need 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.

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.

Dogs can be a problem for nature conservation. 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. There is a need to introduce tighter control under UK legislation.

Golf

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. New initiatives such as the English Golf Environment Award could help to promote good practice.

Military Sites

The areas of land in military ownership at Altcar and Woodvale are also important for nature. On both sites there are internationally important habitats and species, with the 'danger area' of the Altcar foreshore providing a genuine sanctuary for huge numbers of wildfowl, waders and seabirds.

Management at Altcar led to the establishment of a Conservation Advisory Group and increasing opportunities for visits and guided walks.

Fragmentation

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 fragmentation of habitats, and consequent isolation of species, is a particular threat. Some small areas of the original dune system are now left as outliers (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 at risk. Because of their small size management techniques such as livestock grazing can not be used. 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.

Restoration

Potential areas for the restoration or re-creation of habitats or the re-introduction of species should be considered. The 1999 conservation strategy identified some of the main fragmenting features affecting the dune coast along with possible actions to reduce the impact. These included;

- The outlying nature of some sites
- The fragmented nature of some habitats (e.g. heathland)
- Dune erosion at Formby Point
- The River Alt (separating the southern dunes from the northern dunes)
- The pine plantations which break up continuous dune habitat
- Built up areas, roads and railways

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. These will be addressed in the strategy across the scale of the Sefton Coast.

Environmental capacity

In managing the coast there needs to be some understanding of environmental capacity. This can be divided into;

Physical capacity: the point at which site facilities (such as car parks, visitor centres) or access routes become congested

Ecological capacity: the level at which unacceptable change starts to occur to floristic composition, soil structure and wildlife populations.

Perceptual or social capacity: the point at which the recreational experience starts to deteriorate

Economic capacity: the threshold beyond which the investment needed to sustain environmental quality becomes prohibitive.

These potential concerns should be considered in the long-term vision and monitoring established.

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.

50 year vision

We have good information on the land use and state of the dune system from the first full-scale aerial surveys of the 1940s. These are currently being digitised which will allow them to be overlaid on recent photography. The scale of change in this period has been great; asparagus farming has all but died out, the pinewoods have matured, scrub increased after myxomatosis all but wiped out the rabbit populations,

large areas of the rear dunes have been covered in housing, sand-winning created low-lying features, coastal erosion at Formby has changed the coastal features, recreation pressures led to dune de-stabilisation on a large scale, the coastal road was constructed, Pontins, etc, etc.

Will we see such changes over the next 50 years? Over the last 25 years there has been a steady consolidation of land management, an almost complete halt on development in the coastal zone, an extension of tree-planting (and also the removal of plantations), the construction of new golf courses at Formby Hall and renewal of sea defences to modern standards. Perhaps most importantly there has been a change of attitudes and greater support for partnership working. There are benefits for nature, with, for example, conservation action on military sites and golf courses, benefits for people with greater access now than ever before and benefits to Sefton through image, tourism and local pride.

Over the coming decades the Forest Plan will aim to secure the continuity of woodland habitat especially along the zone of the inland dunes. Woodlands at Formby Point already close to the shore cannot be sustained and re-planting is not envisaged in the Forest Plan. However, the woodlands at Altcar will mature, perhaps providing suitable habitat for the expansion of the Red Squirrel population. But the species will remain at risk from disease or replacement by Grey Squirrel. The woods will remain primarily as an amenity.

The historic landscape pattern at Formby Point is likely to remain but should not be frozen –there is some potential for expanding asparagus farming and grazing. Coast erosion will continue and landowners will have to adapt to change.

At Ainsdale and Birkdale the accretion of the 'green beach' will form a large area of new habitat. If the accretion slows the habitat will begin to mature. Inland, the management of the sandhills would be best achieved by grazing and the localised re-mobilisation of some sand to provide habitat diversity.

But what are the unknown factors? Land use changes, significant change in climate predictions (e.g. increased storminess), the loss of species through disease (rabbits, Red Squirrel, some tree species etc), drought etc.

Scope of the 50 vision

The 50 vision to be included in the nature conservation strategy must be reasonably realistic. We cannot add in too much speculation on climate change, population change, transport needs etc.

The question is " What will a visitor in 50 years time expect to see, in terms of the position of the coastline, favourable nature conservation status, maintenance of landscape and historic features (including the woodlands), socio-economic use (including tourism) and public access".

We already have some assumptions that we can add to this scenario. For example we can expect the pattern of land-ownership to be much the same, we have some indication of how the coastline may change, we are planning for the woodland belt to be retained etc.

The nature conservation strategy will be one of the main supporting documents underpinning the Sefton Coast Partnership's Business Plan. Whilst it will set out principles and objectives for nature conservation it must in itself remain flexible and adaptive. Experience has shown that issues and opportunities for nature conservation, and attitudes to conservation, change over time. However, we do need a mechanism to coordinate management and encourage a cooperative approach to action for nature.