

Sefton Coast Nature Conservation Strategy and Biodiversity Delivery Plan

Issues Report: Summary of responses received in initial consultation

Sefton Coast Partnership
Nature Conservation Task Group

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This summary is also available on www.seftoncoast.org.uk/index_consultnature.html

RESPONSES TO PUBLIC CONSULTATION: NATURE CONSERVATION ISSUES REPORT

At the Sefton Coast Forum meeting in February 2006 delegates were asked for their views on a set of draft principles for nature conservation on the Sefton Coast. The principles were presented as;

1. 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 understand the issues and threats by looking at this system in its wider regional, national and international context.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. 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.

6. 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.

A summary of responses is set out below. The value of the exercise was in receiving a wide range of views and opinion from people not involved in day-to-day management of the coast but with extensive knowledge of the area. We feel that the value of this poll of opinion is better without names assigned to comments. All contributors are acknowledged and all requested a copy of the summary.

1. PERCEPTIONS

What makes the coast important for nature?

- Nationally rare habitat containing rare and important species. Biodiversity in one place.
- Its variety of habitats from sand dunes to estuaries, from tidal mudflats to woodland, from golf courses to scrub and dune heath –all important for a tremendous variety of flora and fauna.
- The dune system as a natural habitat for certain species of wildlife
- The land between the coast and the railway being a safe refuge for the Red Squirrel
- Ideal habitat for coastal sand dune and woodland animals and plants –this combination is very attractive to humans –the beach and dunes for children with the trees providing safe (from skin cancer) shady walking
- Its such a wonderful habitat
- Its diversity
- Biodiversity, access and guardianship
- Its unique offer –scientific and recreational
- The landscape including both the pine trees and the mixed woodland (not forgetting some of the scrub), the changing flora and fungi in the autumn, the frontal dunes and the marram grass, birds both on the shore and in the dunes and woods, shells on the sea shore
- Importance does not matter; nature is here makes it appreciated by all
- The pinewoods make Sefton Coast important for nature with its huge diversity of plants and creatures.
- The dynamic littoral zone interface between sea and land –particularly the huge intertidal zone. The interesting differences between the different dune zones. Human cultural influence presents challenges.
- It is an important ‘lung’ of Sefton and Merseyside –a place for human delight and enjoyment. Thousands come each year to walk in the beautiful woodlands. They come to see and enjoy the precious red squirrels. They come to enjoy the beach. Sefton has the lowest tree cover in England 4% compared to 12% in the rest of the country. These woodlands need to be increased to provide sufficient habitat for what will hopefully be an increasing red squirrel population.
- Its position, facing west, a microclimate which is mild, the size of the beach and the distance to the horizon. Most of the sands are not used by people for much of the year. The channels that cross the sands and form a haven for birds and other wildlife.
- The dune system, coniferous woodlands, beaches and outer marshes providing diverse habitats for species, e.g. sea birds, squirrels, sand lizards, Natterjacks and flora. Reflected in European and National designations.

How has the history of land use created the present day coast?

- Rabbit warrening, asparagus farming, plantation for timber resource –have all resulted in present-day conditions

- The whole of the Sefton Coast has been shaped by man for several centuries from the construction of the docks to rabbit warrening, development of golf courses to asparagus farming. Building of roads, houses and railway tracks.. Reclaiming of land at Altcar Rifle Range, the alteration of the Alt Mouth, the dredging of the Mersey channel and the erection of revetments on the Ribble, all have played a part.
- The most significant event has been the planting of the trees and shrubs to build up and protect the coast and stop wind-blown sand ending up in people's back gardens and choking transport infrastructure. Land users had to build up the coast with faggots which substantially increased the land area around the Altcar shooting range.
- The pressure is still on –we should be allowed enhanced protection levels
- The geography has altered, development (urban) has raised awareness of the precious nature of our coast
- There is nothing entirely natural about the coast which has been managed for fishing and as warrens from early times. Extensive areas have been used for asparagus growing and later grazing. Apart from forestry, planting trees and shrubs has been practiced for a long time. Many species of flora and fauna are introductions.
- The past has created our coastline, and will continue to do so, but it will change
- I'm glad to see that hard coastal defence is becoming a thing of the past except where absolutely necessary to allow nature to realign itself.
- It hasn't been over-used
- Prior to English Nature destroying huge areas of the pinewoods all creatures that lived there were not under threat.
- We have little information about the distant past but we know that there has been human impact on the coast for over 4-5,000 years. We know little about the causes of the severe erosion and loss of settlements in the Middle Ages (Ravenmeols, Argameols) but it is possible that human activities may have contributed by destabilising the coastal interface in these areas. In other areas land has been systematically 'reclaimed' from the sea over long periods, by means of a succession of sea-banks (North Meols). At the mouth of the Alt this was achieved, quickly and simply by use of simple measures (gorse faggots). The systematic planting of conifer plantations during the late 19th /early 20th Centuries as a cash crop but also wind-breaks has resulted in the most immediately obvious human influence on the dune landscape. 'Sand-winning' has also had a major influence.
- The dunes are our only sea defence. They are man-made about 200-300 years old. Created by our wise forbears to protect crops and homes from the effects of storm and flooding from the sea. They used faggots and other sand trapping devices to trap the sand. They planted marram grass and starr grass to limit sand mobility. Then planted tree shelter belts to stabilise the dune system to keep blown sand as close to the shore as possible. The dunes must be preserved and stabilised. They are still our only defence against higher sea levels.
- Farming –building of banks to reclaim land. The drainage of channels. Tourism –the building of a seaside resort, marine lake, pier etc. Leisure and retirement town –golf courses, nature reserves etc.
- Human interventions such as the coast road has severed the dune system. Farming practices (warrens, asparagus farming) historically impacted on the landscape. Also tobacco dumping.

What do you think are the opportunities / issues / threats / problems which we should address?

- Dog fouling awful on Ainsdale LNR. Would like to see removal of pine woods to dune restoration through to broad-leaved woodland climax community (natural process of succession!). Red Squirrels also live in broad-leaved woodland and greys can still be controlled in that environment.
- One fear is that the nature programme is irrelevant to other programmes affecting the coast, whether local (e.g. tourism) or national (e.g. ODPM housing on Greenbelt). An additional outcome needed?
- I feel that some areas of the coast should remain no-go areas to the public to protect the flora and fauna for which the coast is famous. There is ample space I feel to implement this. On nature reserves dogs should be restrained –otherwise the disturbance to nature is too great. Coastal erosion is obviously a threat in the future but ongoing research will hopefully address problems before they become too severe.
- A wonderful time to realise that in the end man is not in overall control and that nature is. Networking with other coastal groups is very important.
- With predicted rising sea levels it is vital we keep all the trees and shrubs on the frontal woods, particularly on the eroding portion of the coast as the trees behind are unable to withstand the salt and sand laden winds (p82 CMACS 2000 –Sturgess 1989). Allowing the sand dunes to roll inland is simply not an option as there is too much housing at risk from wind-blown sand. Planting marram grass is not the answer as all the trees and shrubs are needed to provide sufficient habitat for Red Squirrels. There is no lack of sand dune habitat (863 ha) but there is a lack of trees and shrubs (359 ha) in the Red Squirrel reserve. Note: the Red Squirrel refuge has only 263 ha pine, 32 ha broadleaf, 64 ha mixed woodland, which is insufficient to keep a genetically sound population of 500 plus red squirrels; at ideally one red squirrel per hectare requires 500ha of food bearing habitat.
- Visitor numbers, funding, role of volunteers, risk of isolation, positive economic support.
- The public's interest in nature is growing, the area is significant, the challenges of conservation and access need to be met.
- Can we address the problems? Climate change, global warming, erosion –let nature address –it will in the end.
- The sand-winning company
- Increased tourism could be an opportunity as well as a threat to the fragile dune system.
- The threat is that you are in cahoots with English Nature who have created destruction in the pinewoods of the nature reserve. You are in partnership with them yet Councillors and the public are highly suspicious of their devious intentions.
- Due to the extensive publicity given to the Red Squirrels at Victoria Road this has put enormous pressure on that area and is probably under greater threat than Ravenmeols which could possibly more easily sustain it. It is appreciated that income from parking is needed to sustain environmental management.

- Better understanding is needed of the hydrology of the dune system. We all need to know more, particularly relating to the dune slacks where there is a critical relationship between species survival and physical conditions. There is a need for Field Studies / Visitor Centres where information could be collected and disseminated.
- With the ‘management’ of the woodlands, more and more trees are being cut down. English nature clear-felled 11.1 acres in 1992 and 39.5 acres in 1996. At present the National Trust in certain areas is felling one tree in every three. And fire-breaks take out many more (necessary as they are). Where are new trees being planted to increase the size of the woodland habitat for a , hopefully, increasing red squirrel population to be supported?
- An opportunity to involve local people more by keeping them better informed. Excellent Coastlines magazine, local press, thematic workshops are a very good idea and field visits. Threats and problems –increased traffic of people and vehicles, increased housing, increased need for water.
- To reach agreement with key stakeholders and wider community on approach towards nature conservation. Management plans that adapt to coastal processes and take account of climate change predictions and implications. Management plans that aim to support targets for habitat and species conservation, e.g. meeting favourable status. Opportunity to agree a coast-wide, long term, proposal for nature conservation interventions and by doing so –make any proposal more attractive to mainstream funders. Opportunity to agree long term methodology for data capture to monitor the success of the strategy as it is rolled out and to help in its review and continued action. Threats –climate change and resources or adaptation. Resource for ongoing management and implementation of the strategy.

2. PRINCIPLES

Do you think our set of principles about right?

Yes from seven respondents, and;

- Yes –particularly the ecosystem and involvement approaches
- The best approach certainly is a coastwide one. Allowing nature to play its part in shaping the coast with intervention under certain circumstances. The management of certain areas is vital otherwise certain habitats will be lost. The varied habitat is what appeals to people of all walks of life from botanists to sand castle builders.
- You are getting better at talking to the public, provided it is fully carried out. You are beginning to talk about countering fragmentation of the coast, instead of dune restoration. So the public have made some progress as the Councillor’s vote of 4/3/04 made clear. The public will not tolerate any further dune restoration. Managing the coast is becoming too bureaucratic and involving too many people.
- Yes –more networking, communication, use of forums
- No –too much emphasis on species and habitat, confused message ‘allowing nature to take its course’ and ‘manage for the long term’.

- No. The public have no idea what you are on about. You should stop using jargon and print what you mean simply and clearly and publish in all local papers in the area very often so that local tax payers know what it is you are doing with their taxes. You should not have stopped holding the bi-monthly meetings (on coastal concerns) that interested parties were able to attend. Do you still have them and do you hold them in private to bar other groups and interested parties –so that we are all in the dark? Then you just spring your plans on us –that you have cooked up in private. Are you afraid that we may know too much beforehand. The large meeting at the Floral Hall is just a public relations exercise and a lot of hot air and a waste of public taxes.
- We feel that the principles outlined are entirely right
- A coastwise approach may perhaps be right provided that English Nature by this stratagem is not allowed to take control of the whole coastal policy. Will there be anyone willing to stand up to English Nature in their mad desire to disinherit us by cutting down whole swathes of the frontal woodlands? This is crazy from a global warming point of view. The scrub and sea buckthorn and woodlands stabilise the dunes. They need to be retained.
- We think the opportunities for ‘discussion and consultation’ are inadequate. One copy in the Reference Library is not enough. The local papers should have been involved – and radio. There is no mention of tourism. As a seaside resort, this is an important aspect of the coast. There should be a balance between tourism and conservation.

Do you think we have missed anything?

No or “would appear to have covered all points” from six respondents, and;

- Restoration –is this meaningful? Restore to what? Would be better to identify the need/targets (e.g. of SSSI) and the principle should be to prioritise and direct work towards optimisation of these goals.
- Yes. Vital we keep all the Sea Buckthorn on the front line of the coast. It is ideal for soil stabilisation and is much planted on sand dunes for this purpose. The orange pea-sized fruit contains seven times the Vitamin C of lemons and high levels of Vitamin A. Flowers and fruit buds of Sea Buckthorn, hawthorn and sycamore were heavily used by Red Squirrels in the frontal woods when pine seeds were scarce (C. Shuttleworth and J. Gurnell). Likewise lodge-pole pine should be retained for coastal protection and food for Red Squirrels.
- Possibly role of volunteer support group.
- Yes –no reference to greater access for public, or how visitors to the region may ‘see for themselves’ –message is ‘privileged access only’.
- Yes. There is nothing in the report about trying to stabilise the dune system. With the prospect of global warming and higher sea levels this should surely be a very high priority. Experts need to determine how best to stabilise the dunes. The planting of more marram grass, retaining the scrub and frontal woods, using old Christmas trees to help sand build up in the ‘gaps and windblows’ would seem sensible, indeed vital! Also not to grant any extension to the ‘sand-mining’ on the Horse Bank which must be a prime factor in causing the dunes to retreat.
- Tourism

Please give use your views on any /all of the six principles

- One should be seen to be involving the community in any major changes, otherwise another Ainsdale NNR fiasco could arise, which causes bad feeling and wariness for any future management.
- All issues have been covered. The long-term effects of global warming relating to sea level rise and its impact is very important.
- A coastal approach –good. Working with nature –adaptability –good, and correct. Working with coastal processes –OK if minimum involvement. Active management –continuity –OK –all habitats need management. Restoration –the Habitats Directive does not give English Nature the right to expand a habitat for which a site is designated. They have a duty to conserve and maintain the habitat as it existed at the time of designation, i.e. when forms were sent to JNCC/EU. They can only remove trees to avoid fragmentation of the sand dune habitat, due to coastal erosion reaching the trees –but this is years in the future and can be decided at six year intervals. Insufficient involvement with the public started with the ‘LIFE project’ behind closed doors and ended in the costly fight with the public over dune restoration.
- Involvement and community empowerment issues, environmental education levels.
- OK-but should reflect the wider interest of the public –not the scientist.
- All very sound.
- Looking at the coastline in the wider context and working with nature –adaptability and involvement of local people are very relevant. But can we restore natural hydrological processes?
- I am happy with principles 1,2 and 3 with some reservations about bare sand habitats the length of the coast. There is still much to be said for the principles set out in the mid 1970s with open visitor access at Lifeboat Road with increasing restrictions further north. With regard to 4 care should be taken not to impair the landscape characteristics, e.g. by the wholesale removal of scrub. 5 talks about restoration – restoration to what? I am concerned that the only ‘community of interest’ being taken into account is that of amateur naturalists, specialists and scientists. Whilst many of us appreciate ‘nature’ it is important that the general public are not effectively excluded. I would not wish to see the exclusivity of the Ainsdale Nature Reserve extended to the remainder of the coast.
- We applaud each of the six principles –but why is active management indicated only for fixed dunes? The frontal dunes also need active management. The effects of increasing visitor numbers may be a particularly important issue.
- Under the principle of active management the report speaks about conserving important habitats through active ..management of the marshes, heaths, fixed dunes and woodlands. Why do woodlands come last in this list –last in the order of priorities? This document, in my view, smacks of huge input by English nature! ‘Restoration’ has often meant the destruction of woodland and scrub habitat which I am totally against. The woodlands must at all costs be increased by active management, for the red squirrels and the enjoyment of humanity. Biodiversity is the key issue. By destroying woodland, hosts of small animals, birds, bats, butterflies,

insects, invertebrates, fungi and other flora and fauna which thrive in a woodland habitat are denied a right to flourish. These habitats need preserving not destroying.

- On the whole we think the six principles are very good (apart from inadequate consultation to date and the omission of tourism). We find there is some problem with 'non-intervention' and 'active management' –this will be difficult to walk the line between the two. Perhaps this needs expanding more.
- Linked to the involvement principle wonder whether we should be bolder and say we want to promote public access and interpretation but in a harmony with nature conservation objectives (accord with stepped change to Natural England).

3. OUTCOMES

Do you generally agree with the outcomes listed? What other outcomes would you like to see?

Five respondents 'agree', and;

- Nature conservation / development integrated at the earliest opportunity into other development proposals, e.g. transport, industry and housing.
- That the environment is always put first and that any use is always sustainable.
- It would be desirable but difficult to see English Nature change its spots from being dogmatic and dictatorial. It would be necessary to see English Nature's criteria for monitoring the condition of protected sites, detailing all previous readings / grading over the years.
- Stronger Partnerships, ongoing education links, public interest and awareness, role of volunteers.
- Reference to access strategy in plan.
- Money grants should be channelled into private sector, i.e. rewarding deserving farmers and smallholders/landowners. Its main aim would be to ensure that money went where it was most needed and to that end would help good people in our countryside who know their patch inside out and are not moved around every couple of years as a career move. For a long time now Sefton Coast Partnership (EN) has wasted millions on streams of strategies, guidelines and business plans in which commonplace observations alternate with the most impenetrable gobbledegook. I doubt whether our experienced and country-wise charities and pressure groups are much in need of all this boring advice.
- The only outcome would be very limited thinning of the woods as trees became very non-productive or decayed and not clear-felling as is still surreptitiously happening.
- It is important that nature conservation does not detract from other leisure uses of the coast and vice versa. It is arguably more important to protect small children from dogs running wild on the shore as it is to protect wading birds!
- Yes, very much indeed. May we hope to see a very positive response from all concerned, resulting in a stronger partnership as well as greater public involvement. It would be nice if the coastal Civic Societies could play a part. Formby Civic Society is certainly willing to help.

- I would like to be assured that the area of woodland on this delightful coast will be in no way diminished but maintained and increased and that the dunes are maintained and increased by positive intervention to prevent a continual retreat.
- Yes –especially the one about greater involvement. Not just young but the retired too.
- How about evidence for procuring strategic funding for nature conservation, e.g. Lottery and Europe.

With thanks to

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