

Sefton Coast Nature Conservation Strategy and Biodiversity Delivery Plan: Summary of Issues Report

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We are now reviewing our coordinated approach to nature conservation. By April 2007 we aim to publish a revised and updated nature conservation strategy for the Sefton Coast. This will form part of the revised Coast Management Plan along with companion strategies for access and tourism. The strategy for nature will cover the foreshores, saltmarshes and open land along the coast, including national and internationally protected sites, local sites, and the full range of habitats and species.

We will explain the statutory obligations for nature protection, develop objectives of nature management and identify opportunities for habitat restoration. We will use a consensus-building approach to develop our objectives and will prepare a rolling three-year delivery plan closely linked to the North Merseyside Biodiversity Action Plan.

Objectives for nature conservation can be found in the current Coast Management Plan, the conservation strategy for the Sefton Coast 'European site' prepared in 1999 (and now due for review) and in the Sefton Coast Woodlands Forest Plan.

In reviewing our strategy for nature we will take account of new developments over the last five years. These include;

- The designation of the unified Sefton Coast SSSI in 2000;
- Formal UK designation of Sefton Coast Special Area of Conservation in 2005;
- Recent global, European and national biodiversity initiatives and strategies;
- The Government target for 95% of SSSIs to be in good condition by 2010;
- Growing evidence of likely future climate scenarios;
- Introduction of the EU Water Framework Directive 2000, and
- Updated national, regional and local planning policy and guidance.

The nature of the coast

The coast is a particularly special area for wildlife and coastal geomorphology. It has about one fifth of the total area of sand dunes in England and the Ribble and Alt estuaries have some of the highest numbers of birds of any site in Britain. The international importance of the Sefton Coast is much to celebrate; it also gives us a challenge to ensure that we maintain its special value for nature. We are positive about the future; our conservation work over the last 40 years has helped to maintain the Sefton Coast as one of the most important natural coastal areas in Europe.

A healthy natural coast should be able to adjust to change whilst keeping its overall value for nature. For the future we have to address both sustainable management of dunes, woodlands and heaths but we will also need to plan for restoration actions. These will be necessary if we are to preserve the range of slack habitats from open pools to wet woodland, and dune habitats from blowouts and sand sheets to dune grassland and scrub.

Recent work on dune restoration at Ainsdale Sand Dunes National Nature Reserve has highlighted some of the key issues that need to be addressed in managing the coast. The purpose of the conservation strategy will be to place these issues in the broader context of the whole coast.

There is now an opportunity to combine the statutory nature conservation obligations which underpin much of coastal management in Sefton with the growing influence and importance of local action for biodiversity. The local 'biodiversity action plan' has a special focus on the wildlife that is important for this area. Healthy environments also help to add to our quality of life. The natural sites along the coast are rich in opportunities for learning, health and well-being. Conservation management can help to maintain these values.

We now want to open discussions with land managers, conservation agencies and local people to help develop joint solutions to conservation problems. The strategy will need good overall planning, consultation with local communities about ideas and plans and long-term programmes for habitat management. Where restoration actions are necessary, these will need to be well-planned and monitored so that we can continually improve our knowledge of management for nature.

The legal background to nature conservation in the UK gives;

- A scientific view of the relative importance of the habitats and species of the Sefton Coast set against national, European and international criteria; and
- 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.

The main habitats of the Sefton Coast are the intertidal foreshores, salt- and freshwater marshes, the range of dune types from embryo dunes to dune scrub, dune -heath and woodlands. The condition of protected sites, matched against scientific criteria, is monitored by English Nature using a standard approach developed for the UK.

The most recent assessment shows that the foreshore and marsh habitats remain in good condition with no evidence of deterioration of either habitats or their value for birds. Management practices are well tuned to maintain this status. The situation, however, is much more complicated on the dune system. There are concerns about a possible decline in habitat diversity and quality. Where active management has been introduced it appears to be working well and we think, given sufficient resources and support, the dune system can be brought into good condition and maintained in that state.

Management practices such as the control of the spread of invasive scrub, mowing of meadows and slacks and grazing appear to be countering some of the detrimental trends. We are optimistic about the future for wildlife but aware that problems and difficult decisions may lie ahead. Sustained management, but also flexibility, will become increasingly important in our work.

Climate change

Nature conservationists consider that the impacts of climate change may pose the greatest threat to biodiversity in the 21st Century. The inevitability of accelerated changes to global climate patterns is now widely accepted by the international community. Habitats and species will need to be given space to allow movement along corridors; in the future this may form part of a UK Government national 'Adaptation Policy Framework'. With the need to consider the implications of possible long-term changes we will be developing a 50-year vision for the coast as part of the strategy.

Key issues

To begin the process of preparing a new strategy we asked the conservation land managers to raise their current concerns. Eight key issues have been identified;

Coastal change: Continuous coastal change will lead to both losses and gains of habitats. Whilst generally seen as a positive and natural aspect of the coast, erosion is leading to fixed dune habitats being ‘squeezed’ between advancing mobile dunes from the west and the developed areas in the east.

Natural processes: Physical processes such as wind form the dunes, blowouts and slacks. The changes observed to the distribution of plant communities on the coast suggest that the dunes are becoming increasingly stable with a loss of natural dynamics.

Trends in plant communities: There appears to be a widespread increase in vegetation growth leading to the loss of younger more open habitats and the replacement of species-rich dune grassland by coarse grassland.

Fragmentation: The extent, quality and connectivity of habitats on the Sefton Coast is much reduced by the consequences of fragmentation through roads, railways, housing development and afforestation. Some sites, such as small outlying fragments of the dune system are particularly vulnerable to damage.

Water resources: The quality and quantity of 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.

The cumulative impact of human use: Taken together our use of the coastal area places 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 ecosystem and landscape level: Management for nature needs to be considered at the ecosystem level, across the whole coast and over long time periods. We also have to ensure that conservation management is sympathetic to the landscape and cultural values of the coast.

Communication: We want to improve our communication to raise the overall level of interest in nature conservation.

Our process for preparing the strategy and action plan will follow recent guidance published in the document *Management Planning for Protected Areas* which endorses the consensus building methods used on the Sefton Coast. It focuses on a shared approach to the identification of problems, understanding the reasons and working towards shared solutions.

Initial consultation will be by three means. The full Issues Report will be published on the SCP web-pages for general comment, sent to key stakeholders for formal comment and used as background for stakeholder consensus-building working groups. The groups will address; habitat and species conservation, coastal processes and change, conservation of water resources and integrated land management.

The initial participatory consultation phase will come together at a broader workshop in mid-2006. The next stage will be agree a set of principles for nature conservation and begin work on coastwide objectives for nature to be endorsed by the SCP.

Principles

Management principles are necessary to set out the basic ‘ground-rules’ for a coastwide approach to nature conservation. We would now like to invite your comment on some ***draft principles***,

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.

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.

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.

In the first stage of this work we would like to focus discussion on these broad principles as they underpin the strategy. When we have general agreement on principles we can move forward to agreeing a set of coastwide objectives for nature which, in turn, will inform the action plan.

Outcomes

Our work to prepare a revised nature conservation strategy will have a number of outcomes, for example;

- 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