

LARNE LOUGH

Views About Management The Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002 Article 28(2)

A statement of Environment and Heritage Service's views about the management of Larne Lough Area of Special Scientific Interest ("the ASSI")

This statement represents the views of Environment and Heritage Service about the management of the ASSI for nature conservation. This statement sets out, in principle, our views on how the area's special conservation interest can be conserved and enhanced. Environment and Heritage Service has a duty to notify the owners and occupiers of the ASSI of its views about the management of the land.

Not all of the management principles will be equally appropriate to all parts of the ASSI and there may be other management activities, additional to our current views, which can be beneficial to the conservation and enhancement of the features of interest. It is also very important to recognise that management may need to change with time.

The management views set out below do not constitute consent for any operation or activity. The written consent of Environment and Heritage Service is still required before carrying out any operation or activity likely to damage the features of special interest (see the Schedule on pages 2 – 4 of the attached Document B for a list of these operations and activities). Environment and Heritage Service welcomes consultation with owners, occupiers and users of the ASSI to ensure that the management of this area maintains and enhances the features of interest, and to ensure that all necessary prior consents are obtained.

MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES

Coastal Saltmarsh

Saltmarsh is an important habitat for wildlife. Saltmarsh generally forms in the upper parts of intertidal mudflats, usually in more sheltered coastal locations. The vegetation typically shows a succession from lower marsh communities to upper marsh communities, depending upon the extent of tidal inundation. Saltmarshes provide valuable habitat for invertebrates and birds, and act as nursery sites for several fish species. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance and enhancement of the saltmarsh through the conservation of all of the component vegetation communities and their associated native plants and animals. The latter includes important invertebrate communities.

Coastal processes are complex and the management of saltmarshes should take into account the need to maintain or restore, where necessary, the natural processes of sediment movement and the dynamics of saltmarsh succession. Many of the more sensitive saltmarsh species can be lost through intensive management treatments, such as fertiliser and herbicide application.

Where saltmarshes are managed, this is usually by grazing; it helps to provide a variety of different habitats, particularly important for wintering bird species and invertebrates. If grazing ceases on these sites, there may be a loss of botanical diversity as rank grasses become dominant. However, not all saltmarshes require active management to retain their conservation interest, particularly where there has not been a history of grazing.

Specific objectives include:

On sites that have traditionally been grazed, Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the continuation of this practice. However, overgrazing should be avoided as it may result in a reduction in species diversity and cause poaching. Where there has not been a history of grazing, the saltmarsh should be able to maintain itself as grazing-sensitive species are likely to be present.

Due to its position, coastal erosion can be particularly damaging to saltmarsh. Where possible, Environment and Heritage Service would encourage management which favours the natural processes of sediment movement and the dynamics of saltmarsh succession.

Maintain the diversity and quality of the saltmarsh by ensuring that there is no application of fertiliser, slurry or herbicide.

Saline Lagoons

Saline lagoons are an important habitat for wildlife. They are bodies of water that have a restricted connection to the sea and may vary from brackish to fully saline or hyper-saline. Associated species of saline lagoons are highly specialised to cope with these conditions. In Larne Lough, an artificial brackish lagoon in the northwest supports an unusual bryozoan (sea mat) community and an open water macrophyte (aquatic plant) community. Environment and Heritage Service would wish to see the quality and extent of the saline lagoon being maintained or enhanced through the conservation of its associated native plants and animals. The latter also include important invertebrate communities.

Specific objectives include:

Management should aim to prevent the net loss of lagoon habitats caused by land development and land reclamation.

Ensure that recreational use of lagoons is managed to minimise disturbance to wildlife.

Management should aim to maintain good water quality as nutrient enrichment can have a detrimental effect due to restricted water exchange.

Wintering Waterbirds

Larne Lough ASSI is a wintering site for large numbers of migratory waterbirds. It supports internationally important numbers of Light-bellied Brent Geese and

populations of Great Crested Grebe, Shelduck, Goldeneye, Red-breasted Merganser and Redshank that are significant in an all-Ireland context.

Swans, geese, ducks and waders are attracted by a rich food supply and secure roost sites. Wildfowl make use of both open water and surrounding open habitats, including coastal saltmarsh, for feeding. Aquatic vegetation and invertebrates are important food sources for many ducks while swans, geese and some ducks obtain a proportion of their food on land. Waders feed predominantly on shellfish and burrowing invertebrates in intertidal mudflats and other wet areas. Accumulations of seaweed along the tideline may also contain significant prey resources for waders. The quality of feeding areas is, however, susceptible to the influence of operations undertaken both within and outside the ASSI that may result in pollution or changes in water quality or unacceptable levels of disturbance to feeding birds. It is therefore important that damaging practices are minimised around the ASSI.

Secure roost sites, free from disturbance, are essential to allow the birds to conserve energy when food resources are unavailable, as at high tide. Some of these roosts may lie outside the ASSI. Undisturbed roosts are particularly important during severe winter weather. Wildfowl usually roost on open water, while waders tend to use islands or isolated headlands. The variety of habitats present within the ASSI should be managed in order to safeguard the wintering waterbird population.

Larne Lough represents a valuable resource for many different types of recreational and other activities. However, as noted above, many of the important species that are present on the site can be affected by these activities. The birds which use the area for feeding and roosting are especially vulnerable to disturbance at high tide roosts and during severe winter weather.

Specific objectives include:

As feeding habitats, including beaches, mudflats and shellfish beds, are critical to the birds well-being, Environment and Heritage Service would not wish to see any operations undertaken that would reduce either their area or the food resources they hold for wintering waterbirds.

Environment and Heritage Service would wish to see disturbance minimised around known roost sites, especially those used by birds at high tide, and also at frequently used feeding areas.

Management should seek to minimise the removal of species through unregulated bait digging and shellfish gathering which can lead to damage or loss of invertebrate communities and hence food availability for the wintering birds. Such activities are also a source of disturbance to the birds.

Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the sensitive use of the site through the effective management of activities which may cause disturbance, for example through the provision of refuges and the adoption of good practice by different user groups.

Breeding Terns

Larne Lough supports internationally important numbers of breeding Common, Roseate and Sandwich Terns. These migratory seabirds are present between April and September and feed on fish in inshore waters. Breeding terns are highly susceptible to disturbance and predation and consequently often choose to nest on islands or isolated man-made structures surrounded by water. They are particularly attracted to areas of shingle or broken shells. Areas attractive to terns within Larne Lough also support an important community of other breeding bird species. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance or enhancement of habitat or structures used for nesting by terns.

Specific objectives include:

Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance or enhancement of sites currently used by breeding terns and the creation of potential new sites. Shingle areas should not be allowed to become overgrown. Nest sites can be extended, or new sites created, by provision of a layer of broken shells. Chick survival would be enhanced by creating shelter structures within the breeding sites to provide refuges from aerial predators or inclement weather. Such activities should only be undertaken in consultation with Environment and Heritage Service.

Human disturbance to breeding terns should be minimised by discouraging landing at nesting sites through appropriate signage or creating marked "buffer zones" to prevent close approach by boats and other craft.

Management principles applicable to all habitats throughout the site

Environment and Heritage Service would encourage all activities associated with site maintenance, management, access and recreation to be undertaken in a sensitive manner that ensures disturbance to the site and its wildlife is minimised.

Discourage non-native species, especially those that tend to spread at the expense of native wildlife.

Maintain the diversity and quality of habitats associated with the main site features such as fen and scrub, through sensitive management. These adjoining habitats can often be very important for wildlife, such as breeding birds and invertebrates.



E Diane Stevenson
Authorised Officer

Dated the 28TH of JANUARY 2008