

MURLOUGH

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 Murlough 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 5 and 6 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

Sand dunes

Sand dunes are an important habitat for wildlife. They develop where sand is blown landwards from the beach and is deposited above the high water mark. A process of succession takes place as vegetation colonises the bare sand, creating a diverse range of communities, each with their own characteristic species. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance and enhancement of the dunes, through the conservation of all stages in the succession and their associated native plants and animals. The former includes plants of limited distribution within Northern Ireland and the latter includes important invertebrate communities especially the scarce Marsh Fritillary butterfly.

Coastal processes are complex and the management of sand dunes should take into account the need to maintain or restore where necessary, the natural processes and dynamics of dune development and succession.



Many of the more sensitive sand dune species can be lost through intensive management treatments, such as fertiliser and herbicide application. Although sand dunes generally need some management to retain their interest, occasional patches of scrub and Bracken can be valuable in providing additional habitat niches for birds and invertebrates including the Marsh Fritillary. However in the absence of management, Bracken and coarse grasses can quickly take over and ultimately woody species may become dominant.

Grazing is the most effective way of controlling the growth of more vigorous species and helping to maintain open areas and a diverse sward structure. Appropriate grazing also creates the right conditions for Devil's-bit Scabious, which is the larval foodplant of the Marsh Fritillary. In the absence of grazing, other methods - such as cutting or mowing to create open areas and reduce the dominance of Bracken, coarse grasses and woody species - may be desirable.

Many of the vegetation types on sand dunes are fragile, and heavy disturbance can lead to loss of cover and soil erosion. However, where recreational and other pressures are not severe, the impact of activities such as light trampling can be beneficial. For example, tracks through dunes may open up areas where vegetation cover has become rank and provide small areas of bare sand, thus increasing the diversity of habitats available.

Specific objectives include:

Environment and Heritage Service would encourage low intensity grazing to conserve and enhance the features of interest. The effects of non-domestic grazing animals, such as rabbits, should also be taken into account, as these can contribute greatly to the maintenance of a short, species-rich sward.

In general, the control of scrub and Bracken within sand dune communities can be achieved most effectively through the appropriate grazing regime. However where there has been a prolonged absence of grazing, additional scrub and Bracken control, such as mechanical cutting and/or the careful application of herbicides as agreed with Environment and Heritage Service, may be required.

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

Management of amenity beaches can affect the early stages of dune formation by removing the strandline that helps to trap blown sand and to develop new dune ridges. Where appropriate, Environment and Heritage Service would encourage management practices which allow the development of a natural strandline.

Where recreational pressures are significant enough to result in the loss of vegetation cover and prevent recovery, Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the restoration of the vegetation through the sensitive management of access.

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.

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. 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 normally be left 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.

Wintering Waterbirds

Murlough ASSI is a wintering site for large numbers of migratory waterbirds. It supports populations of Great Crested Grebe, Mute Swan, Light-bellied Brent Goose, Shelduck, Common Scoter, Red-breasted Merganser, Oystercatcher, Lapwing, Dunlin, Knot 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.

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.

Coastal processes and sea-level history

The earth science interest at Murlough occurs as the active coastal beach and associated dunes together with the offshore sediments within the adjoining bay. The history of coastal development and of sea-level change is contained within both the buried and exposed sediments throughout the site. Environment and Heritage Service would like to encourage the maintenance of the ASSI and its earth science interest.

Provided no damaging activities, as set out in the Schedule (pages 5 and 6), are undertaken without consent, the needs of owners, occupiers and the Department can be met. Earth science features, such as those at Murlough, may require occasional management intervention in order to maintain access to the features and continued operation of the processes on which these features depend. This could include selectively removing any major build up of debris. Environment and Heritage Service would seek to maintain the coastline in as natural a state as possible. Sites such as Murlough are particularly susceptible to damage through movement (other than through natural processes) or extraction of sediment (sand, gravel or other grade material) from anywhere within the site or the offshore area and to any alteration of the coastline.

Specific objectives include:

Maintain the physiographical series in an undamaged state.

Maintain access to the physiographical series.

Mudflats and sandflats

Mudflats and sandflats are important habitats for wildlife. The intertidal, or littoral, sediments support a wide variety of marine invertebrates, in addition to beds of seagrass and a rich algal and sponge assemblage. They also represent an important food source for many fish and bird species. In addition, beyond the seaward edge of the ASSI has been designated a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) in accordance with the Habitats Directive. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance and enhancement of both littoral and sublittoral mud and sand habitats, through the conservation of their associated native plants and animals.

Specific objectives include:

Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance of good water quality. Seagrass beds, for example, are sensitive to excessive nutrient enrichment which can lead to outbreaks of the ephemeral algae *Enteromorpha* that can subsequently smother the seagrass.

Mudflats and sandflats are sensitive to changes in sediment quality and distribution. As far as possible, Environment and Heritage Service would encourage natural sediment movements within the coastal system.

As mudflats and sandflats are sensitive to disturbance, Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the sympathetic use of the habitat to ensure that disturbance and physical damage to intertidal habitats and communities is minimised.

In addition to causing disturbance, unregulated bait digging, shellfish gathering and other such activities may lead to damage to, and a possible loss of, species and communities. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage sustainable practices that minimise such effects.

Common Seal

The Common Seal is found all around the coastline of Northern Ireland. Haul-out areas are required for pupping during June and July, and also for resting throughout the year, particularly during the moulting season from July to September. Sheltered inshore bays and estuaries are the preferred haul-out areas; the habitat can vary from rocky shores to mudflats and sandbars, usually close to deep water and good feeding grounds.

In Murlough significant numbers of Common Seals use the Ballykinler sandbar as a haul-out, while Grey Seals occasionally haul-out along the shore. Management

should seek to ensure that these areas are maintained and that access to them by seals is not restricted. Where seal haul-outs occur Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance and conservation of the surrounding marine habitat (mudflat and sandbar) to support the seal population.

Specific objectives include:

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

Disturbance around known haul out sites, especially during the pupping season (June to July for the Common Seal and September to November for the Grey Seal), should be minimised. Access by walkers, shellfish gatherers and boats to the vicinity of haul outs during the breeding, pupping and moulting season should be restricted, where possible.

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 such as Sea Buckthorn and Common Cord-grass.

Maintain the diversity and quality of habitats associated with the main features of interest, such as grassland, scrub and woodland through sensitive management. These adjoining habitats can often be very important for wildlife, including rare plants and invertebrates such as the Marsh Fritillary butterfly.



E Diane Stevenson
Authorised Officer

Dated the *1st* of *FEBRUARY* 2008