

OUTER BELFAST 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 Outer Belfast 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

Wintering Waterbirds

Outer Belfast Lough ASSI is a wintering site for large numbers of migratory waterbirds. As part of the Belfast Lough area it supports internationally important numbers of Redshank, and populations of Great Crested Grebe, Great Cormorant, Shelduck, Mallard, Scaup, Goldeneye, Eider, Red-breasted Merganser, Oystercatcher, Lapwing, Ringed Plover, Dunlin, Knot, Black-tailed Godwit, Curlew and Turnstone that are significant in an all-Ireland context.

Wintering wildfowl and waders are attracted by a rich food supply and secure roost sites. Wildfowl make use of both open water and shoreline habitats for feeding. Aquatic vegetation and invertebrates are important food sources for the ducks using Inner Belfast Lough, while waders feed predominantly on burrowing invertebrates in inter-tidal 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, 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.

Outer Belfast 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 when present at their 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 roosts, 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.

Geological Series

Earth science features provide information about a region's geological history and can also aid interpretation of geological processes in the past and present.

The earth science interest at Outer Belfast Lough occurs as beach and foreshore exposures, on the southern shore in the area of Grey Point, Cultra and Holywood and on the northern shore at Greenisland. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance of the ASSI and its earth science interest.

Provided no damaging activities, as set out in the Schedule (pages 2-4), are undertaken without consent, the needs of owners, occupiers and the Department can be met.

Earth science features such as those at Outer Belfast Lough may require occasional management intervention in order to maintain access to, and exposure of, the geology. This could include, for example, selective removal of vegetation or any major build up of loose rock.

Specific objectives include:

Maintain the geological series in an undamaged state.

Maintain access to the geological series.

Maritime Cliff and Slopes

Maritime cliff and slopes at Outer Belfast Lough ASSI are important for wildlife. The habitat includes a range of vegetation types, including strandline, saltmarsh, grassland, heath and scrub communities. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance and enhancement of these communities through the conservation of their associated native plants and animals.

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

Grazing is the most effective way of controlling the growth of more vigorous species, helping to maintain a diverse sward structure which continues to support species-rich vegetation. In the absence of grazing, cutting and removal of the vegetation to create open areas and reduce the dominance of coarse grasses is desirable.

Specific objectives include:

Low intensity grazing would contribute to the conservation and enhancement of the features of interest. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the introduction of this practice, where feasible. Where grazing is not feasible, other management practices, such as cutting, may be used.

Prevent the loss of more sensitive grassland species through the control of scrub, bracken and rushes. In general, this can be achieved through the appropriate grazing regime. In some cases other methods of control, such as cutting, may be required.

Maintain the diversity and quality of the vegetation by encouraging the maintenance of good water quality through the control of pollution and ensuring there is no application of fertiliser, slurry or herbicide to the site.

Where appropriate, encourage the blocking of drains to prevent the vegetation from drying out.

Management principles applicable to all habitats throughout the site

Ensure that 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 maritime cliff and slopes such as fen and woodland through sensitive management. These adjoining habitats can often be very important for wildlife.



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Authorised Officer

Dated the 28th of January 2008