

STRANGFORD LOUGH (PART 3)

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 Strangford Lough (Part 3) 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 4-6 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

Mudflats

Mudflats are an important habitat for wildlife. The littoral sediments support a wide variety of marine invertebrates that represent an important food source for many fish and bird species. They also support beds of seagrass and a rich algal and sponge assemblage which are sensitive to habitat disturbance and water and sediment quality. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance and enhancement of the mudflat, through the conservation of its associated native plants and animals.

Specific objectives include:

As disposal of dredge or other material can lead to smothering of species, Environment and Heritage Service would discourage such activities.

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

Management should minimise the removal of species through unregulated bait digging and shellfish gathering which can lead to damage to, or loss of, communities and habitat.

Management should aim to maintain good water and sediment quality whilst the sediment budget within the estuarine or coastal system should not be restricted by anthropogenic influences.

Seagrass (*Zostera*) beds

Seagrass beds are an important habitat for wildlife, supporting rich communities of plants and animals. They act as nursery area for fish species and form an important food resource for wintering wildfowl. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance and enhancement of the seagrass bed, through the conservation of its associated native plants and animals.

Specific objectives include:

Management should aim to maintain good water and sediment quality, as seagrass beds are sensitive to excessive nutrient enrichment which can lead to outbreaks of the ephemeral algae *Enteromorpha* that can subsequently smother the seagrass.

Management should encourage the sympathetic use of the habitat to ensure that disturbance and physical damage to the seagrass is minimised.

Management should also aim to ensure that the sediment budget within the estuarine or coastal system is not restricted by anthropogenic influences. Construction, such as causeways and seawalls, can alter the sedimentary regime which may in turn impact seagrass beds as they are sensitive to such changes.

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. These include plants of limited distribution in Northern Ireland and 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 which is 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.

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 hypersaline. Associated species of coastal lagoons are highly specialised to cope with these conditions. The Dorn in Strangford Lough (Part 3) is a silled lagoon and is unique in both its hydrological dynamics and in the diversity of its flora and fauna. 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 includes 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.

Intertidal Rock

Rocky shores are an important habitat for wildlife. The littoral zone is composed of a variety of different habitats and communities, including rock pools, bedrock ledges and platforms, gullies, crevices and boulder fields. A diverse range of seaweeds and marine animals are associated with these habitats and most are specially adapted to periods of immersion. Environment and Heritage Service would seek to retain the diversity of

intertidal rock communities through the conservation of its associated native plants and animals.

Active management of rocky shores is usually minimal as these are naturally occurring habitats dominated by tidal processes and wave exposure. It is important that good water and sediment quality are maintained. Environment and Heritage Service would seek to maintain the coastline in as natural a state as possible.

Direct damage to rocky habitats can be caused by activities such as dredging and construction. In addition, anthropogenic structures may have an impact by altering the wave regime and may also restrict the sediment budget within the coastal system.

Specific objectives include:

Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the sympathetic use of the habitat to ensure that disturbance and physical damage to the intertidal rock is minimized.

Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance of good water quality through the control of pollution as this may affect reef communities, particularly due to increased turbidity (which may reduce algal communities) or siltation (which may smother animal communities).

Environment and Heritage Service would discourage the unregulated removal of species through bait digging, shellfish gathering and seaweed harvesting which can lead to damage to, or a loss of, coastal communities and habitat.

Environment and Heritage Service would encourage management which favours the natural processes of sediment movement.

Environment and Heritage Service would encourage sustainable fishing practices and, where appropriate, the development of non disturbance zones.

Maritime grasslands and heaths

Maritime grasslands and heaths are important habitats for wildlife. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance and enhancement of the grassland and heathland through the conservation of its associated native plants and animals. These include plants of limited distribution in Northern Ireland.

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 quickly 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 grassland and heath. 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 has contributed to the conservation and enhancement of the features of interest. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the continuation 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 species-rich grassland 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 grasslands from drying out.

Common Seal

The Common Seal, *Phoca vitulina*, 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. As a result of this, management should ensure that these areas are maintained and that access to them by seals is not restricted. The Grey Seal, *Halichoerus grypus*, also occurs occasionally. Where seal haul outs occur, Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance and conservation of the surrounding marine habitat (rocky shore or 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.

Environment and Heritage Service would seek to maintain the current range of designated haul out sites of common seals (and grey seals where applicable) through establishing a programme of management and monitoring.

Wintering Waterbirds

Strangford Lough (Part 3) ASSI is a wintering site for large numbers of migratory waterbirds. As part of the Strangford Lough system it supports internationally important populations of waterbirds including Light-bellied Brent Goose, Shelduck, Golden Plover, Knot, Bar-tailed Godwit, Redshank and numbers of Little Grebe, Great Crested Grebe, Great Cormorant, Greylag Goose, Wigeon, Teal, Gadwall, Mallard, Pintail, Shoveler, Goldeneye, Red-breasted Merganser, Oystercatcher, Lapwing, Grey Plover, Ringed Plover, Dunlin, Curlew, Turnstone and Coot that are significant in an all-Ireland context.

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 geese and some ducks, such as Wigeon, 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 susceptible to change due to operations undertaken both within and outside the ASSI that may result in pollution or deterioration 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.

Breeding Terns

Strangford Lough (Part 3) ASSI supports internationally important numbers of breeding Common, Arctic 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. 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.

Coastal processes

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 in Strangford Lough (Part 3) occurs as the inter-tidal mudflats together with the associated offshore sediments within Ardmillan Bay and the northern shore of the lough. 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 5-7), are undertaken without consent, the needs of owners, occupiers and the Department can be met. Earth science features such as those at Strangford Lough (Part 3) 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, for example, 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 this are particularly susceptible to damage through movement or disturbance (other than through natural processes) of sediment or its extraction from anywhere within the site or the offshore area, and to any alteration of the shoreline.

Specific objectives include:

Maintain the physiographical series in an undamaged state.

Maintain access to the physiographical series.

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 such as Common cord-grass.

Maintain the diversity and quality of habitats associated with the main habitats, such as moderately exposed sediment shores, open water, swamp, grassland,

heath, bog, scrub and woodland through sensitive management.

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Authorised Officer

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