DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

DECLARATION OF AREA OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST AT UPPER LOUGH ERNE - BELLEISLE, COUNTY FERMANAGH. ARTICLE 24 OF THE NATURE CONSERVATION AND AMENITY LANDS (NORTHERN IRELAND) ORDER 1985.

The Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland (the Department), having consulted the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside and being satisfied that the area delineated and described on the attached map (the area) is of special scientific interest by reason of the flora and fauna and accordingly needs to be specially protected, hereby declares the area to be an area of special scientific interest to be known as the 'Upper Lough Erne - Belleisle area of special scientific interest'.

The area is of special scientific interest because of the flora and fauna. It encompasses the northern part of Upper Lough Erne and includes the open waters of the lough, in addition to a range of associated wetland and other communities within the adjoining drumlin landscape. The Belleisle area is characterised by the extent of its open water and swamp communities, and by its wooded islands. In addition, there are areas of traditionally-managed grasslands, which are rich in plant species. There is a diverse range of plant and animal communities, with continuous transitions from open water to drier ground and important concentrations of both individual species and groups of species.

The open waters of the main lough and smaller satellite loughs contain a variety of aquatic species, including Yellow Water-lily Nuphar lutea, and a number of Pondweeds, such as Broad-leaved Pondweed Potamogeton natans, Blunt-leaved Pondweed P. obtusifolius and Shining Pondweed P. lucens.

Depending on the degree of exposure to wind and wave action, in many places the open waters give way to a swamp zone, which is dominated by the dense growth of tall grass and grass-like species such as Common Reed Phragmites australis and Common Club-rush Schoenoplectus lacustris. This is particularly well-developed within the sheltered bays and inlets of the area. Exposed shores tend to have more open swamp communities, with Water Horsetail Equisetum fluviatile and Common Spike-rush Eleocharis palustris prominent.

Behind the swamp zone is an area of fen, where sedges are the main component of the vegetation, particularly Tufted-sedge Carex elata and Bottle Sedge C. rostrata. This zone is frequently species-rich, with a wide range of associated herbs, including such scarce species as Cowbane Cicuta virosa, Greater Water-parsnip Sium latifolium and Flowering-rush Butomus umbellatus, in addition to more common plants like Water-plantain Alisma plantago-aquatica and Purple Loosestrife Lythrum salicaria.

In many places where the shoreline is grazed, there is a transition to wet grassland, which is very variable in species content. In general, grasses and rushes are dominant here, especially Creeping Bent Agrostis stolonifera, Soft Rush Juncus effusus and Hard Rush J. inflexus, with a range of herbs such as Creeping-Jenny Lysimachia nummularia, Marsh Pennywort Hydrocotyle vulgaris, Lesser Spearwort Ranunculus flammula and Creeping Buttercup R. repens. Where flushing by more base-rich waters occurs, a sward dominated by sedges such as Glaucous Sedge Carex flacca and Carnation Sedge C. panicea is found. Important concentrations of species-rich grassland communities have developed where

traditional farming methods, such as hay-making, have been maintained. Although Sharp-flowered Rush Juncus acutiflorus is generally the dominant species, these meadows can be very rich in associated herbs and sedges. There are also communities in which Meadow Thistle Cirsium dissectum is prominent.

Wet woodland is found where the shoreline is ungrazed or only very lightly grazed. The woodland has a canopy in which species such as Willow Salix spp. and Alder Alnus glutinosa are dominant, with other species such as Spindle Euonymus europaeus and Guelder-rose Viburnum opulus scattered throughout. Buckthorn Rhamnus cathartica is frequent in the area, although it is a scarce plant in Northern Ireland. The ground flora beneath this generally resembles that of the swamp and fen zone. Areas of drier woodland are found on many of the islands in the lough. These contain mature stands of mixed deciduous species, including Sessile Oak Quercus petraea, Ash Fraxinus excelsior and Downy Birch Betula pubescens. In places there is a well-developed understorey with shrubs such as Hawthorn Crataegus monogyna, Hazel Corylus avellana and Holly Ilex aquifolium. The ground flora is very variable, ranging from grass-dominated swards, with species like Giant Fescue Festuca gigantea and False Brome Brachypodium sylvaticum, to more typical woodland herbs such as Wood Avens Geum urbanum, Enchanter's-nightshade Circaea lutetiana, Herb-Robert Geranium robertianum, Sanicle Sanicula europaea,Primrose Primula vulgaris, Wood-sorrel Oxalis acetosella and Common Dog-violet Viola riviniana.

The area contains many vascular plants with a restricted distribution in the British Isles. In addition to some of those listed above, rare plants include Arrowhead Sagittaria sagittifolia in the open water, Narrow-leaved Water-plantain Alisma lanceolatum, Marsh Pea Lathyrus palustris, Marsh Stitchwort Stellaria palustris, Greater Spearwort Ranunculus lingua and Needle Spike-rush Eleocharis acicularis in the swamp and fen, and Fen Violet Viola persicifolia and Northern Bedstraw Galium boreale on more exposed rocky shores.

Otters Lutra lutra are known to frequent the area.

Belleisle contains significant numbers of bird species. In summer, its wet grasslands support numbers of breeding waders, including Snipe Gallinago gallinago, Lapwing Vanellus vanellus, Redshank Tringa totanus and Curlew Numenius arquata. The most notable areas are at Inishcreenry and Lusty Beg. Overwintering birds include Whooper Swan Cygnus cygnus, Mute Swan C. olor, Great Crested Grebe Podiceps cristatus and Goldeneye Bucephala clangula. Greenland White-fronted Geese Anser albifrons flavirostris have recently been recorded from the area.

Although still relatively poorly known, the invertebrate communities of the Upper Lough Erne basin are notable. As the main body of Upper Lough Erne and many of the satellite lakes are eutrophic, the aquatic fauna is frequently dominated by common lowland species. However, whilst individual areas may be relatively species-poor, the fauna of the complete system is rich and varied. Amongst the better known groups, there are records of over 70 species of water beetle, 20 species of aquatic Hemiptera and 14 species of dragonfly. A number of these species are found most commonly within Northern Ireland in the Upper Lough Erne area.

Species typical of the open water on exposed shores include the bug Velia caprai, the beetles Laccobius striatulus and Orectochilus villosus, and the Swan Mussel Anodonta cygnea, which can be very abundant here in what is the centre of its distribution in Northern Ireland. Another species typical of these areas and also virtually unknown outside the Erne basin in Northern Ireland, is the aquatic bug Micronecta poweri. On open, lightly grazed grassland behind these stony shores, saldid bugs and ground beetles are frequent, including the uncommon species Saldula opacula and Pelophila borealis.

In sheltered areas where there are stands of open swamp and fen vegetation, a more diverse aquatic fauna is found, with several notable species. Surface-living aquatic insects such as whirligig beetles and pondskaters are frequent in these areas. The most common whirligigs are often Gyrinus paykulli and Gyrinus distinctus, two species which are very rare throughout most of Britain and Ireland. The presence of the gerrid Limnoporus rufoscutellatus is also significant, as this has rarely been recorded before in Ireland. Other notable aquatic insects recorded in the Upper Lough Erne system are the beetles Hygrotus quinquelineatus, which is characteristic of the large base-rich lakes in Ireland, Noterus crassicornis and Coelambus impressopunctatus and the Hairy Dragonfly Brachytron pratense, for which this area is its Northern Ireland stronghold.

Information is especially scanty for terrestrial groups which depend upon the marginal habitats. However, there are indications that the unimproved meadows are especially rich in ground beetles, with several notable species including the ground beetle Carabus clatratus. Likewise the fauna of the scrub and woodland is largely undocumented. One species for which this habitat is known to be important is the Brimstone butterfly Gonepteryx rhamni. Buckthorn Rhamnus cathartica is the larval foodplant for this butterfly, which establishes breeding populations periodically throughout Upper Lough Erne.

SCHEDULE

The following operations and activities appear to the Department to be likely to damage the flora and fauna of the area:

1. Any activity or operation which involves the damage or disturbance by any means of the surface and subsurface of the land, including ploughing, rotovating, harrowing, reclamation and extraction of minerals, including sand, gravel and peat.

2. Any change in the present annual pattern and intensity of grazing, including any change in the type of livestock used or in supplementary feeding practice.

3. Any change in the established method or frequency of rolling, mowing or cutting.

4. Any change in the annual pattern of application of manure, slurry or artificial fertiliser.

5. The application of herbicides, fungicides or other chemicals deployed to kill any form of wild plant, other than plants listed as being noxious in the Noxious Weeds (Northern Ireland) Order 1977.

6. The storage or dumping, spreading or discharge of any material not specified under paragraph 4 or 5 above.

7. The destruction, displacement, removal or cutting of any plant, seed or plant remains, other than for

   (i) plants listed as noxious in the Noxious Weeds (Northern Ireland) Order 1977;

   (ii) normal cutting or mowing regimes for which a consent is not required under paragraph 3 above.

8. The release into the area of any animal (other than in connection with normal grazing practice) or plant. 'Animal' includes birds, mammals, fish, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates; 'Plant' includes seed, fruit or spore.

9. Burning.

10. Changes in tree or woodland management, including afforestation, planting, clearing, selective felling and coppicing.

11. Construction, removal or disturbance of any permanent or temporary structure including building, engineering or other operations.

12. Alterations of natural or man-made features, the clearance of boulders or large stones and grading of rock faces.

13. Operations or activities which would affect wetlands (including marsh, fen, bog, rivers, streams and open water), e.g.

   (i) change in the methods or frequency of routine drainage maintenance;

   (ii) modification in the structure of any watercourse;

   (iii) lowering of the water-table, permanently or temporarily;

   (iv) change in the management of bank-side vegetation.

14. The killing or taking of any animal in a manner likely to affect the continued existence of the species within the area except as provided for under the terms of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.

15. The following activities undertaken in a manner likely to damage or disturb the wildlife of the area:

   (i) Educational activities;

(ii) Research activities;

(iii) Recreational activities;

(iv) Exercising of animals.

16. Changes in game, waterfowl or fisheries management or fishing or hunting practices.

Sealed with the Official Seal of the
Department of the Environment for
Northern Ireland on 27 February, 1995

John Crowther.

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ASI94265/CWB /EFH

FOOTNOTES

(a) Please note that consent by the Department to any of the above operations or activities does not constitute planning permission. Where required, planning permission must be applied for in the usual manner to the Department under Part IV of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991. Operations or activities covered by planning permission are not normally covered in the list of Notifiable Operations.

(b) Also note that many of the operations and activities listed above are capable of being carried out either on a large scale or in a very small way. While it is impossible to define exactly what is "large" and what is "small", the Department would intend to approach each case in a common sense and practical way. It is very unlikely that small scale operations would give rise for concern and if this was the case the Department would give consent, particularly if there is a long history of the operation being undertaken in that precise location.