
22. Poole Harbour European Marine Site

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The features of interest that make Poole Harbour internationally important are explained and the significance of Poole Harbour in its context as part of a network of special sites across Europe is discussed. The Habitats Regulations make special provisions for European Marine Sites and the requirements of Regulations 33 and 34 in particular are explained.

Natura 2000

The term Natura 2000 comes from the 1992 EC Habitats Directiveⁱ and is the title for a network of legally protected areas across the European Community. The sites that make up the Natura 2000 network have been designated to conserve natural habitats and species of wildlife that are rare, threatened or vulnerable across the Atlantic Bio-geographic Region. The Natura 2000 network represents the very best nature conservation sites across Europe.

The Natura 2000 network is made up of two types of site which originate from two different but complementary European Directives. The Birds Directiveⁱⁱ requires member states to designate Special Protection Areas (SPAs) where an area supports significant numbers of wild birds and their habitats. The Habitats Directive requires member states to designate Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) where a site supports outstanding examples of habitats that are characteristic of the Atlantic Bio-geographic Region, or if it supports rare, endangered or vulnerable species of plants or animals. Where a SPA or SAC includes any part of the sea or seashore, it is also referred to as a European Marine Site.

Because of the immense productivity of estuaries generally, combined with the UK's relatively mild climate and position on the western edge of the European landmass, estuaries are extremely important wintering areas and stopping points for many migratory waterbirds. The UK has a significant contribution to make to the international conservation of populations of wild birds and the habitats on which they depend, and this has been recognized in the designation of many estuarine and coastal SPAs. The UK's SPA network supports an average of over 2 million non-breeding waterbirds (Stroud *et al.*, 2001) and contributes to the

ⁱCouncil Directive 92/43/EEC on the conservation of natural habitats and wild flora and fauna.

ⁱⁱCouncil Directive 79/409/EEC on the conservation of wild birds.

suite of sites across Europe. Those SPAs and SACs that include a marine element are represented in the UK by the 39 European Marine Sites which amount to over 0.5 million ha.

Poole Harbour

The intertidal mudflats, sandflats and marshes of Poole Harbour support large numbers of wintering wildfowl and waders that are of both national and international significance. It was notified as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in 1990 and was classified as a SPA in 1999. As the SPA includes the intertidal area, Poole Harbour is also a European Marine Site. The extent of the Poole Harbour European Marine Site is just over 1983 ha and lies between Mean Low Water and Highest Astronomical Tides.

Poole Harbour qualifies as a SPA by supporting:

- **internationally important populations of regularly occurring Annex 1 speciesⁱⁱⁱ**
the site supports internationally important populations of Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*, Mediterranean Gull *Larus melanocephalus* and Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*
- **internationally important populations of regularly occurring migratory species**
the site supports internationally important numbers of regularly occurring migratory Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* and Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*
- **an internationally important assemblage of waterfowl**
Poole Harbour regularly supports over 20,000 birds (Cranswick *et al.*, 1999).

The intent and specific requirements of the Birds Directive and the Habitats Directive are transposed into UK legislation by the Habitats Regulations^{iv}. The Habitats Regulations form the basis for establishing, protecting and managing SPAs and SACs in the UK. In terms of European Marine Sites, Regulations 33 and 34 are key, because they make special provisions for European Marine Sites.

Regulation 33

Regulation 33 requires that as soon as possible after a site becomes a European Marine Site, English Nature must advise other relevant authorities on the specific conservation objectives for the site and identify any operations which may cause deterioration of natural habitats or disturbance of species for which the site has been designated.

English Nature set out the Regulation 33 advice for Poole Harbour European Marine Site in November 2000. An inherent part of this advice is the favourable condition table. This

ⁱⁱⁱ Species listed in Annex 1 of the Birds Directive are in danger of extinction, rare or vulnerable and are the subject of special conservation measures concerning their habitat.

^{iv} The Conservation (Natural Habitats &c.) Regulations 1994.

identifies attributes of the site, against which the impact of development proposals and other plans or projects may be assessed. It also provides a framework for English Nature to report on the condition of Poole Harbour SPA to the European Commission. In the case of many terrestrial European Sites, sufficient is known about the preferred or target condition of qualifying habitats to be able to define measures and associated targets in condition monitoring. However, with European Marine Sites, less is known about habitat condition and in many cases, and certainly in the case of Poole Harbour European Marine Site, existing condition needs to be established through baseline survey.

Food availability is one of the attributes that requires monitoring by English Nature to confirm that the interest features of Poole Harbour SPA are in favourable condition. In Autumn 2002, the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology and EMU Ltd, respectively, were commissioned to undertake a baseline survey and subsequent analysis of bird food availability. The objectives of the project were to establish the existing bird prey invertebrate abundance and biomass in the intertidal sediment communities of Poole Harbour. This baseline information will be used to compare future surveys, so that any significant changes in prey availability may be detected, bird condition and mortality over a winter season predicted and may also identify whether certain bird species are at risk from insufficient food.

It is a case in point of how we need to ensure that science informs the management of our most special sites. With the Habitats Regulations requiring a precautionary approach with respect to SPAs and SACs, the ability to be more predictive may allow improvements to be targeted more efficiently and potential threats to the site to be identified at an early stage. The Poole Harbour Study Group has so far been an enormously valuable partnership, in that the organizations and individuals represented on the Study Group are working together to understand more about Poole Harbour and its condition. Examples of where the Study Group has been instrumental in furthering our understanding of the site are in the publication of the *Poole Harbour Flora*, the *Reedbed Assessment*, and the soon to be published, *Wader Roost Survey*.

Regulation 34

Regulation 34 is another key aspect of the Habitats Regulations in terms of European Marine Sites. Regulation 34 provides for the establishment of an agreed management scheme for a European Marine Site. The intention of a management scheme is to provide a mechanism for resolving management issues and to set a framework in which activities that occur within a site are managed either voluntarily or through regulation, in order to achieve the conservation objectives of the European Marine Site.

Whilst the requirement to provide advice under Regulation 33 is a statutory requirement, the establishment of a management scheme is at the discretion of the relevant consenting authorities with responsibility for the management of the site. On the great majority of sites, the development of a management scheme is a sensible and practical tool in the

management of the site. Indeed, in the broadest sense, on every European Marine Site, there is likely to be some form of management scheme, or the revision of an existing plan; the scale will depend on the number and complexity of potential conflicts and management issues.

European LIFE funding established the UK Marine SACs Project, which amongst other things piloted the production of management schemes for 12 marine SACs, selected as being representative of a range of management issues encountered on the national series of 39 European Marine Sites. In Poole Harbour, there is an existing Aquatic Management Plan which was first published in 1992. The Poole Harbour Steering Group is about to embark on a revision of this plan. It is anticipated that where a particular management approach has worked well, this should be taken forward into the revision of the plan. The Steering Group is in a strong position now, as we can reflect and learn from the successes and difficulties encountered, not just with our own existing management plan for Poole Harbour, but also from the other management schemes piloted for European Marine Sites elsewhere. It is undoubtedly an opportunity to build on existing partnerships, raise awareness of the importance and value of Poole Harbour, and ultimately, to help to achieve and sustain the favourable condition of this internationally important site.

References

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- Stroud, D. A., Chambers, D., Cook, S., Buxton, N., Fraser, B., Clement, P., Lewis, P., McLean, I., Baker, H. and Whitehead, S. (2001) *The UK SPA Network: Its Scope and Content*. Volume 1. *Rationale for the Selection of Sites*. Peterborough: Joint Nature Conservation Committee.