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JOINT NATURE CONSERVATION COMMITTEE

COMMON STANDARDS MONITORING FOR DESIGNATED SITES IN THE UK – PROGRESS SINCE 1999

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1. Development of guidance

- 1.1 Subsequent to the decision to implement the monitoring programme for designated nature conservation sites in 1999 and report on the condition of the whole site series in 2005, the country agencies decided that guidance on setting and assessing conservation objectives was needed to assist staff in undertaking site monitoring and assessment. JNCC and the country agencies commenced a programme to develop such guidance across the range of species, habitat and earth science features which occur on UK protected sites. The process is now well advanced with guidance available on conservation objectives and assessment methodologies for about 75% of the features of designated sites.
- 1.2 The first guidance was approved in October 2002 since when others have been produced on a regular basis. This guidance has been issued to field staff and applied in the monitoring of SSSIs.
- 1.3 A seminar to introduce the guidance to other organisations which own or manage protected areas was held on 19 February 2004. Speakers illustrated the use of the guidance to set conservation objectives for features on sites, and the use of attributes and targets to assess the state of those features using the common standards monitoring categories.
- 1.4 One month prior to the seminar, all of the approved guidance was re-issued to country agencies to raise awareness with stakeholders.
- 1.5 Guidance is now available for earth science features, for coastal, lowland grassland, lowland heathland marine, upland and woodland habitat features, and for birds, amphibians, reptiles, terrestrial mammals and vascular plants. Guidance for lowland wetland and freshwater habitats was considered by the recent meeting of the Chief Scientist Group. Further guidance on marine mammals, invertebrates and lower plants is being drafted for submission to the Chief Scientists Group later in 2004. Following the seminar, the guidance is now available on the JNCC website at <http://www.jncc.gov.uk/csm>.
- 1.6 The application of guidance is to be monitored over the next two field seasons after which amendments and/or clarification will be considered.

2. Making Assessments

- 2.1 Country Agencies commenced implementation of Common Standards Monitoring in April 1999. The common standard for the monitoring cycle is that all features should be monitored and reported at least once every six years. A feature at site level should be monitored and assessed in its entirety over a period no greater than three years (i.e. a large feature does not have to be assessed in one year). The first six year cycle will run to March 2005. Over the past four years staff at the JNCC Support Unit, Lead Co-ordination Networks, Inter-Agency Working Groups and members of the Inter-Agency Monitoring Group, have worked to clarify the detail of CSM including the reporting process. A significant amount of progress has been made by the country agencies; however, a number of challenges remain.
- 2.2. Throughout the first six year cycle there has been a strong ethic of continual improvement and learning. While desirable, continual improvement is not without its problems, the quality and quantity of guidance, and depth of experience, available to the agencies at the end of the cycle is far greater than at the beginning, and this of course has an effect on the assessments. The greater availability of guidance and experience is almost certainly one reason why there is such a heavy assessment burden on the last year of the cycle. To date, a third of the estimated 22,000-23,000 assessments have been received by JNCC. Some of the assessments carried out during 2002/03 have not yet been received by JNCC and this, together with the fact that some assessments will relate to both ASSI/SSSI and also to internationally designated features, means that the numbers of features monitored so far is probably about half the total. We anticipate that the figure will reach about 70% by the end of the first 6 year monitoring round.

3. Remaining Challenges

3.1 Overlap between ASSI/SSSIs and International sites

In order to avoid duplication of effort and to report on features across the entire site series, it is necessary to determine and agree the overlap between ASSI/SSSIs and international sites, as well as the read across between ASSI/SSSI features and international features. This work is underway within each agency but is some way from completion and the different agency approaches have yet to be considered from a UK perspective.

3.2 Different country agency approaches

Each agency has approached the assessment from different perspectives.

- i. England has concentrated on assessments for habitats on SSSIs;
- ii. Scotland has made steady progress across the board by making assessments for all designations and feature types;
- iii. Wales has concentrated on assessments for cSAC features;
- iv. Northern Ireland has made assessments for a range of types of features on most sites, but has yet to undertake assessments on SPAs.

Also, the rate at which assessments have been undertaken and reported to JNCC has varied between the agencies and is currently markedly higher for England than for Northern Ireland and Wales, with Scotland occupying an intermediate position. This, together with the differing priorities referred to above, mean that, at the moment, no type of feature (broad-leaved woodland, dry heathland, neutral grassland etc) can be assessed across the entire UK site series.

3.3 *Coverage of features*

In the 2005 report, it will be desirable, if not essential, to report on the condition of at least some features across the entire site series. Specific focus will need to be given to some features in the final year of the cycle to ensure that this is possible. Urgent consideration needs to be given to identify those features for which full coverage is most easily achieved in order that agencies have time to build these features into their final year field activities.

3.4 *Favourable Conservation Status*

In 2006/7, the UK will be required to report on implementation of the Habitats Directive which will include judgements of the conservation status of all species and habitats listed in the directive's annexes. It is essential that Common Standards Monitoring is able to make a significant contribution to this work.

3.5 *Quality/Consistency/UK Aggregation and Reporting*

At present, guidance is insufficiently tested but preliminary results seem to show that CSM works. It is also necessary to investigate what effects, if any, the different agency approaches to application of the guidance have on the condition assessments. Use of the guidance across the entire UK site series is preferred before agency differences can be properly investigated.

3.6 *Activities and Management measure*

Information is being collected at the same time as assessments are made, but it has to be separated and categorised for aggregation and reporting purposes. There has not been sufficient time for this information to be collated and reported to date but no problems are foreseen in reporting the information at the end of the six year cycle.

4. Six Year Report

4.1 JNCC expect to collate data from the country agencies in July - December 2005 to create the first six year report. JNCC expect to receive all assessments made in the first six year cycle (ending March 2005) in July 2005. The timetable for delivery of results in the final year has been set to ensure that all results available are incorporated into the final report.

4.2 Protected areas have been one of the primary concerns of UK nature conservation for decades. In 2005, we will be able, for the first time, to report on the condition of the habitats and species that protected areas aim to safeguard. While it will not be possible to report on all features, it will nevertheless be a very significant achievement that can then be built upon in

subsequent years to report on the condition of more UK features, to contribute to European protected area assessments and as a significant contribution to the assessment of favourable conservation status.