

UK SPAR SCIENTIFIC WORKING GROUP

MEETING 2007/1

23RD MAY 2007

11.00 - 15.30 JNCC, Monkstone House, Peterborough

Approved Minutes

Present (around table):

Ian Bainbridge (IB) (Chair) – Scottish Executive

Kate Jennings (KJ) – Natural England

Nigel Buxton (NEB) – SNH

David Stroud (DAS) – JNCC

Bob Ford (BF) – Defra

Jeremy Wilson (JW) – SEL

Gwyn Williams (GW) – RSPB & on behalf of Wildlife & Countryside Link

Helen Baker (HB) (Secretary) - JNCC

Richard Hearn (RH) – WWT

Phil Alcock (PA) – Scottish Executive

Via video-conference:

Sian Whitehead (SW) – CCW

Jim Reid (JR) – JNCC

Andy Webb (AW) - JNCC

Apologies:

Lucy Adams (ABPmer), Diana Reynolds, Louise George, Wendy Twell (NAW), David Mallon, Steven Dora (Scottish Executive), Miranda Davis (WaterUK), Ben Underwood (CLA), Ian Enlander (EHS), Fiona Howie (NFU)

1. Introductions and apologies

1.1. Apologies were received as listed above.

2. Minutes of last meeting (21st September 2006, 2006/2) ¹

2.1. The minutes of the 21st September 2006 meeting were accepted without change and will be published on the JNCC website.

3. Feedback from the November 2006 meeting of the Natura 2000 & Ramsar Steering Committee (Chair)

3.1. SPAR SWG Secretariat had previously circulated draft minutes from the November 2006 N2KRSC meeting.

3.2. The N2KRSC endorsed in principle the recommendations from the 2005 Annual Report.

3.3. The Committee had debated at length the 2008-2010 review paper; it recognised the importance of the review and agreed that it should be undertaken. The Committee accepted most of the recommendations in the cover paper to the review paper, with some rewording (see appended note), and noted that funding decisions were outside its remit and would have to be discussed between the administrations, SCAs and JNCC.

¹ The 2007 February meeting of the SPAR was cancelled.

- 3.4. Chair had raised the issue of N2KRSC 'bouncing' debate on 'grey' areas (those touching on policy) back to the SPAR SWG. The Chair of the Committee had recently undertaken a review of how the different fora interacted and had written to the members of the Natura 2000 & Ramsar Forum to stimulate a change in how that forum worked. Other changes were being put in place and would be discussed at the next Committee meeting. It was hoped that these changes would clarify the roles of each group and ensure that issues were considered in the most appropriate way.
- 3.5. Concern was raised over the terminology used by the N2KRSC in referring to the completeness of the SPA network ('substantially complete') and nature of the 2010 review ('health check'). The NGOs still consider there to be large gaps in the network and will raise this in the next Forum meeting. Defra gave assurance that the wording was a reflection of current thinking, but that it is recognised by government that a review is necessary (the JNCC paper to the N2KRSC had been fully supported). It was noted that several new classifications had been made in response to both the 2001 review and the RSPB IBA/SPA project, and that progress had been made on assessing the broader issues identified, such as the treatment of cropped habitats. However, the NGOs remain concerned about what the 2010 review would achieve and that it would further delay action on some issues raised in response to the 2001 review. It was agreed that a detailed plan of the 2010 review should be discussed at the next meeting and JNCC was requested to develop this; additional comments on the scope of the review should be sent to JNCC as soon as possible.

Action Point 07/1/1: JNCC to prepare a detailed scope and timetable for the 2010 SPA & Ramsar Networks Review for the autumn meeting of the Group.

Action Point 07/1/2: Group members to provide any additional comments on the scope of the 2010 review to JNCC by 31 August 2007.

Action Point 07/1/2a: JNCC to consider implications of recent ECJ judgements in further developing the scope of the 2010 SPA & Ramsar Networks Review.

4. Natura fora: changes to groups and relationship with SPAR SWG (Defra)

- 4.1. Defra had undertaken a review of how the existing Natura fora worked, partly to improve consideration of marine SPA issues, and would be discussing these ideas with the devolved administration in the next N2KRSC meeting.
- 4.2. The Chair of the N2KRSC had written to Natura Forum members seeking a different approach to how that group worked and greater involvement from the NGOs in driving the agenda. Future structure of the Forum meetings was planned to include a workshop session that would give better opportunity for focussed discussion of a single theme: the Chair of the Forum had set out Defra's thoughts on priorities for discussion themes. This change in approach had been welcomed by members of the Forum, but further debate on thematic priorities was needed.
- 4.3. Defra has proposed that marine Natura issues be discussed in a separate decision-making, government only forum (the Marine Biodiversity Policy Steering Group; MBPSG), which would report to the N2KRSC. The existing JNCC Marine Natura 2000 Project Group (MNPG), which is the SCA forum that provides advice to government, will report to MBPSG and the existing Natura Forum will be invited to discuss marine issues. SPAR SWG has been making recommendations to MNPG since the latter group was established, but it was agreed that a direct relationship with MBPSG would be beneficial and the Chair agreed to discuss this with the Chair of the MBPSG.

- 4.4. It was agreed that the SPAR SWG should still consider marine issues, given that this remained the only forum at which the NGOs could input on scientific and technical approaches to SPA and Ramsar designation.

Action Point 07/1/3: Chair to discuss relationship between SPAR SWG and Marine Biodiversity Policy Steering Group with the Chair of that group, brief Secretariat and provide feedback to the Group at the next meeting.

Action Point 07/1/4: Secretariat to circulate the N2KRSC papers on changes to the Natura fora.

Action Point 07/1/5: Group to review Defra thematic priorities (for N2KR Forum), relative to its work plan and the 2010 review, at its autumn meeting.

Action Point 07/1/5a: Defra invited all members to provide them with comments on the proposed priorities for thematic discussions within the Natura 2000 & Ramsar Forum.

5. Marine SPAs: update on progress (JNCC Aberdeen)

- 5.1. *Colony extensions*: More data are being collected this summer on use of inshore waters by red-throated divers during the breeding season (funding has been secured). This will be the final season of field work and JNCC is aiming to report on this work by October 2008. Surveys of terns in all parts of UK are underway, but no work is planned this year for shags.
- 5.2. *Waterbirds during non-breeding period in inshore waters*: A substantial number of surveys took place last winter, in most countries; JNCC will circulate a list of areas to the Group. Phase 1 (population estimation) reports are nearly complete for Wash, Tay & St. Andrews and Firth of Forth and will be reported on at a future meeting. Progress on classification of an SPA in Liverpool Bay has stalled and JNCC/SCAs are awaiting guidance from Defra and NAW on how to finalise the formal consultation boundary. The decision on Liverpool Bay will influence the way in which the Phase 2 (boundary determination) analyses for other areas are undertaken. It was queried whether JNCC had assessed the protection requirement of species and come to view on what the network should like, but there is still a considerable amount of survey work to do and so it is intended that the 2010 review should aim to address this.
- 5.3. *Offshore areas*: Phase 1 analysis of the ESAS database (interpolation to give smoothed density surfaces and an update of the Marine Classification Criteria [MCC]) is out to tender with the aim of completion by March 2008. The analysis will be done based on the previously used ESAS seasons, but these will be species-specific. The MCC has been revised recently by its authors and JNCC will make an assessment of whether this new version can be used for assisting in identifying areas that might be suitable for consideration against the UK SPA Selection Guidelines (Phase 2 of the process). JNCC agreed to circulate the revised MCC paper.
- 5.4. A revised GB estimate for non-breeding red-throated divers had been accepted, after independent peer-review, by the Inter-agency Ornithologists' Working Group for operational use. A paper has been submitted to a journal and once the final version is available JNCC will circulate it to the Group.

Action Point 07/1/6: JNCC to circulate an update on completed aerial-surveys and work programme, and present the findings of completed Phase 1 aerial-survey analyses at the autumn 2007 meeting of the Group.

Action Point 07/1/7: JNCC to circulate the revised Marine Classification Criteria to the Group.

Action Point 07/1/8: JNCC to circulate the final version of its paper on the GB population estimate for non-breeding red-throated diver once available.

6. Site Provision Index: update on progress (paper SPAR_230507_1; JNCC/RSPB)

- 6.1. JNCC gave an overview of the background and status of the project, and how it will influence the 2010 review. Validation of the approach remained a key need and it was suggested that a small workshop be held to further develop the index and test ideas. RSPB suggested that its recent reserves acquisition review might provide useful information for the testing process. RSPB had also done some work on auto-correlation between attributes used in an index and would provide a copy to JNCC. Natural England had undertaken a recent assessment and would provide comments to JNCC/RSPB. However, the Group was in agreement that there was a risk of over-analysis and that the SPI should be as simple as possible given its intended use.
- 6.2. It was re-iterated and agreed that the SPI was not intended to be deterministic, but would provide broad 'bands' that could aid assessment of whether SPA provision was likely to be sufficient to meet protection needs for any given species in combination with other appropriate special measures. It was suggested that guidance on how to use the SPI in practice should also be developed.
- 6.3. JNCC noted that it would also be commissioning during 2007/08 a broader review of similar approaches elsewhere in the world to inform further development of the SPI and that this review also provided an opportunity for independent validation.
- 6.4. It was suggested that once the SPI was finalised that it would allow us to assess non-qualifying species that do occur in the SPA network, like kingfisher, to determine the extent to which the network might contribute to the conservation of these species; this could be done in the 2010 review. It was also noted that the SPI will give us a more objective indication of those species for which site-based conservation is either unsuitable or will only ever make a small contribution to conservation.

Action Point 07/1/9: Group members to provide additional comments on the Site Provision Index paper to JNCC/RSPB by end June 2007, especially in relation to whether the attributes are right. Also, to nominate, by the same date, suitable potential attendees of a workshop to test outcomes.

Action Point 07/1/10: JNCC/RSPB to organise a workshop to further develop the Site Provision Index, including developing a questionnaire to invite wider assessment to feed into the workshop.

7. Common Standards Monitoring: the first 6-year report (JNCC PowerPoint presentation)

- 7.1. JNCC presented an overview of the results of the first CSM assessment², focussing specifically on the SPA network.
- 7.2. It was queried how CSM allows site rather than feature assessment. The focus at UK level is feature condition, but at country or more local scales the SCAs are using the information in a variety of ways to assist with site-level assessment and management approaches. It was

² Williams, J.M., ed. 2006. *Common Standards Monitoring for Designated Sites: First Six Year Report*. Peterborough, JNCC.

suggested that a site-based analysis would be advantageous as it may help highlight local vs. more generic factors influencing feature and site condition. The process could replace the analysis of proportion of favourable features in 10 km squares with a similar analysis at the site level. The Wetland Bird Survey Alert System could be a useful model for how to analyse and present information at different scales.

- 7.3. The influence of CSM in delivering surveillance was queried. JNCC noted that CSM feeds off existing surveillance as well as driving new surveillance, but was not a good mechanism for determining the suite of surveillance that was required to deliver information for all conservation needs. JNCC is currently developing a surveillance strategy for this purpose. It was noted that there were gaps in coverage for the first report and queried whether this was due to lack of data because of the way in which national surveillance schemes operated. JNCC commented that most gaps were not due to lack of data, but to timing constraints in undertaking assessments between the guidance being finalised and the end of the cycle. However, it was noted that for some of the rarer species current periodicity of surveys may not give data in each 6-year cycle: species on a 12-year cycle of repeat national survey under the SCARABBS³ programme. For some of these species the SCAs have undertaken special surveys for CSM needs, but not necessarily at all sites; there is a significant cost implication in undertaking special surveys for all species and habitat features covered by CSM and so it is likely that full coverage will not take place in each 6-year CSM cycle.
- 7.4. National surveys, e.g. under SCARABBS, are now typically including site coverage to meet CSM needs whilst also retaining sampling design to deliver national population estimates. It was suggested that CSM-specific surveys could be synchronized to allow national population estimates to be derived. JNCC and the SCAs were already investigating the degree to which this could be achieved, focusing on seabirds initially, but coordination of surveillance across the site networks whilst considering surveillance needs for all features (not just birds) was a complex task.
- 7.5. It was queried whether there was a strategic approach to filling gaps in coverage, i.e. are sites/features not covered in one cycle identified for definite coverage in the next cycle? SCAs commented that there was no specific guidance, but that this issue was influencing approach in the new cycle. It was suggested that prioritisation could also be influenced by status assessments, to ensure that species of highest conservation concern were being covered more regularly and/or more completely. Prioritisation was difficult given the complexity of the process, for example a site that had all or most features in unfavourable condition would be prioritised for remedial action and repeat survey of features in subsequent cycles. Rationalising all monitoring requirements for thousands of features on hundreds of sites will always be a considerable challenge and it will take time to fully develop the most effective approach given that there will always be resource constraints.

8. Lough Neagh: report on study of diving duck declines (EHS)

- 8.1. EHS was unable to attend the meeting and will be invited to make this presentation at the autumn 2007 meeting.

9. White-tailed eagle: update on potential for home range analysis (Chair, Sea-eagle Project Team)

- 9.1. SPAR SWG had previously discussed the status of white-tailed eagle (September 2006) and the Chair had subsequently asked the Sea-eagle Project Team (SEPT) about whether an analysis of the Mull and Skye data to show occupancy history and home range characteristics would be feasible.

³ SCARABBS = Statutory Conservation Agencies/RSPB Annual Breeding Bird Scheme

- 9.2. A research project is underway to look at spatial and temporal consistency in occupation of territories and SEPT will try to address SPAR SWG suggestions in this project. The project is due for completion in August and results might be available for the autumn meeting of the Group (SEPT to confirm).
- 9.3. SEPT considered that modelling of home ranges, as is routinely done for golden eagles, may not be feasible for white-tailed eagles; they are more generalist and use a wider range of habitats and there are insufficient data on home range use to begin this kind of analysis.
- 9.4. It was noted that there are three new white-tailed eagle re-introduction projects in planning and this should be taken into account when considering SPA provision for this species.

Action Point 07/1/11: Secretariat to invite the Chair of the Sea-eagle Project Team to present results of the territory occupancy study to a future meeting of the Group.

10. Bilateral discussions

- 10.1. EHS: no report received.
- 10.2. CCW: no progress since last meeting on chough SPAs.
- 10.3. SNH: The Oa, Islay (chough) has been classified and Renfrewshire Heights (hen harrier) is now with the minister for a classification decision. Several other sites are well progressed, but due to objections are at various stages of further assessment. A small number of new sites are now being considered in line with commitment made by Scottish Executive two years ago to address elements of the IBA/SPA project. Outcomes of the 2010 review will be important and SNH is keen to see more detail on what the review will entail. A national Scottish crossbill survey is now being planned for 2008, which will give the first comprehensive overview of population size and distribution for this endemic species. The short-eared owl pilot survey is progressing well and will be complete in early 2008; it will indicate whether a national survey is feasible and, if so, an estimate of cost.
- 10.4. Natural England: No progress on classification of Liverpool Bay (see 5.2 above). The extension to the Humber Estuary SPA is near to classification and consultation on the Upper Nene Valley Gravel Pits has been completed. The LIFE Bittern sites have been added to the IBA/SPA comparison list of areas for further consideration and it is intended that a paper will be submitted to the NE Board soon.

11. Any other matters arising from the minutes of the last meeting and discharge of actions

- 11.1. Action Points 06/1/5 (Moray Firth aerial survey analysis), 06/2/6 (GB population estimate for non-breeding red-throated diver) and 06/2/7 (home range analysis of aerial survey data) were noted as outstanding. APs 06/1/5 and 06/2/7 will be discharged at the next meeting and AP06/2/6 is modified by 07/1/8 (see above).
- 11.2. Following from item 11.1 at September 2006 meeting: the ORNIS Committee has noted the Advocate General's opinion on the way in which Ireland had treated dispersed species (like kingfisher) under Article 4 and sites no longer qualifying, and awaits the final judgement. Defra legal advice is not complete and is considered low priority until judgement made.
- 11.3. Several minor changes to the 2006 Annual Report were agreed and Secretariat will circulate a final version with these minutes.

11.4. Secretariat was asked to circulate a revised list of SPAR SWG members.

12. Any other business

12.1. JNCC gave an update on progress with analysing the 2002 national peregrine survey data. BTO had been collating and cleaning the data for the SNH species framework project, but this had not been completed in 2006/07, which was when JNCC had funds to commission a UK-wide review. No JNCC funds were available during 2007/08 to undertake this analysis. SCAs commented that they might be able to fund if there was under-spend at September out-turn and asked JNCC to provide a project briefing.

Action Point 07/1/12: JNCC to provide SCAs with a project description for the peregrine analysis and request funds to initiate the project in 2007/08.

13. Work programme review

13.1. The Secretariat outlined the proposed work plan for the next few meetings and the Group agreed the general scope of the autumn agenda. The Secretariat proposed that the work programme be reformatted to more usefully reflect the 2010 review and this was welcomed by the Group.

13.2. JNCC outlined three small projects that it was intending undertaking during 2007/08 that were relevant to the ongoing work of the Group and the 2010 review: (1) analysis of the winter gull survey data to identify areas for consideration as SPAs; (2) analysis of the last two Non-estuarine Waterbird Surveys (NEWS) to assess whether they are suitable for identifying areas that could be assessed against the UK SPA Selection Guidelines; (3) a review of techniques similar to the Site Provision Index that have been developed and used elsewhere.

14. Dates and venues of next meetings

14.1. Secretariat to seek suitable dates for the next two meetings.

Attachments:

Approved minutes of the 21st September 2006

Revised list of Members of the SPAR SWG

Final approved version of the 2006 Annual Report

UK SPAR SCIENTIFIC WORKING GROUP

MEETING 2007/1, 23RD MAY 2007

Action Point Summary

(In Chronological order and not minute order, batched by work period or future meeting)

**Actions to be discharged prior to September/October 2007 meeting:
(A request for papers will be sent out nearer the time)**

Action Point 07/1/1: JNCC to prepare a detailed scope and timetable for the 2010 SPA & Ramsar Networks Review for the autumn meeting of the Group.

Action Point 07/1/2: Group members to provide any additional comments on the scope of the 2010 review to JNCC by 31 August 2007.

Action Point 07/1/2a: JNCC to consider implications of recent ECJ judgements in further developing the scope of the 2010 SPA & Ramsar Networks Review.

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Action Point 07/1/6: JNCC to circulate an update on completed aerial-surveys and work programme, and present the findings of completed Phase 1 aerial-survey analyses at the autumn 2007 meeting of the Group.

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Action Point 07/1/12: JNCC to provide SCAs with a project description for the peregrine analysis and request funds to initiate the project in 2007/08.

Actions from this meeting to be discharged at a later date:

Action Point 07/1/8: JNCC to circulate the final version of its paper on the GB population estimate for non-breeding red-throated diver once available.

Action Point 07/1/10: JNCC/RSPB to organise a workshop to further develop the Site Provision Index, including developing a questionnaire to invite wider assessment to feed into the workshop.

Action Point 07/1/11: Secretariat to invite the Chair of the Sea-eagle Project Team to present results of the territory occupancy study to a future meeting of the Group.

Appended note

The decisions of the Natura 2000 & Ramsar Steering Committee on the recommendations made in the cover note to the scope of the 2008-2010 SPA & Ramsar (avian) Networks Review paper considered at its November 2006 meeting

The SC agreed that the 2008-2010 SPA Review was an important piece of work that needs to be taken forward and completed. It agreed the following:

1. That it was committed to both undertaking such a review and implementing its recommendations;
2. That it wished JNCC to coordinate the review on behalf of government, with continuous consultation via the N2KR Steering Committee;
3. To provide JNCC with confirmation of the scope of the review;
4. To consider and agree with JNCC a suitable timetable to complete the review, taking into consideration time required to resolve issues raised by the SPAR SWG and implement recommendations;
5. To consult the Natura 2000 & Ramsar Forum on the review.