

UK SPA SCIENTIFIC WORKING GROUP

MEETING 2003/3
23RD SEPTEMBER 2003
09.30 - 15.30 NFU, London

Approved Minutes

Present (around table):

Ian Bainbridge (Chair) - SEERAD	Wendy Twell (WT) – NAW
Helen Baker (HB) (Secretary) - JNCC	Trish Fretten (TF) – NAW
David Stroud (DAS) – JNCC	Sian Whitehead (SW) – CCW
Lucy Adams (LA) - ABPmer	Louise Vall (LV) - Defra
Jeremy Wilson (JW) - Scottish Environment Link	Trevor Salmon (TS) - Defra
Gwyn Williams (GW) – RSPB & on behalf of Wildlife & Countryside Link	Andy Webb (AW) - JNCC
James Robinson (JRo) – WWT	Nigel Buxton (NB) – SNH
Ben Fraser (BF) - EN	Jim Reid (JRe) – JNCC
	Andrew Clark (NFU)
	Colin Hedley (CLA)

Apologies:

David Smallshire (Defra), David Mallon (SEERAD), Ian Enlander (DOE(NI)), Chris Spray (Water UK), Stephen Hull (ABPmer).

1. Introductions and apologies

- 1.1. The Chair welcomed new representatives and re-iterated the workings of the Group.
- 1.2. Apologies were received as listed above.

2. Minutes of last meeting (7th May 2003, 2003/2)

- 2.1. Two minor amendments were agreed:
 - 2.1.1. Under 8.2, wording change to: ‘... that osprey might also be regarded as a re-establishing species in England.’
 - 2.1.2. Under 11.1, wording change to: ‘RSPB is of the opinion that Shell Flats should be classified as an SPA for common scoter; there was no SEA for round one wind energy developments. RSPB is considering lodging a complaint with the EC.’
- 2.2. The Group approved the minutes with these minor amendments.

General Items I

3. Feedback from Natura 2000 Steering Group

3.1. Annual Report.

- 3.1.1. The Chair gave feedback on the presentation of the 2001-2002 Annual Report to the Natura 2000 Steering Group (N2K SG) in July 2003. A letter from the Chair of the

N2K SG had been sent to IB just prior to this meeting and circulated to the members of the SPA SWG. The N2K SG agreed that receipt of an annual report was an appropriate way of presenting the findings of the SPA SWG, but also welcomed input at any time the SPA SWG felt it appropriate.

- 3.1.2. On recommendation 1.3.1.1 of the SPA SWG Annual Report, the N2K SG agreed with the recommendation that SPA provision for twite should be considered and will request that EN progress this. No future report on this was anticipated.
- 3.1.3. On recommendations 1.3.1.2 and 1.3.1.3, the N2K SG agreed to consider these issues at its November 2003 meeting and report back the SPA SWG for its January 2004 meeting, subsequently issuing a policy statement in spring 2004. Defra agreed to consider any further thoughts on application of the SPA Selection Guidelines from the SPA SWG, but was not specifically going to consider targets. The SPA SWG agreed that the concept of network targets was an important one to consider in future, but that the complexity of developing targets would preclude doing this in the short-term.
- 3.1.4. On recommendation 1.3.1.4 (updating citations in accordance with the SPA Review), the N2K SG would consider this issue further at its November 2003 meeting and then report back to the SPA SWG.
- 3.1.5. On recommendation 1.3.1.5 (landscape scale management and effects on SPAs), the N2K SG agreed that it would be useful for the SPA SWG to brief them on arising issues when appropriate. The SPA SWG agreed that it would be valuable to explore some specific existing scenarios to help it identify how to take this area of work forward in the most productive way. A variety of species scenarios was suggested: hen harriers, golden plover, stone curlew, etc. Work on specific cases will be agreed in future.
- 3.1.6. Recommendation 1.3.1.6 (marine SPA data needs) was noted by the N2K SG and would be considered in the other marine fora. A report would be sent to the SPA SWG in January 2004.

Action Point 1: Group members to send Defra any further comments on application of the SPA Selection Guidelines by 18th October 2003.

Action Point 2: Defra to check with the Chair of the Natura 2000 Steering Group whether it would be appropriate to publish the response to the SPA SWG Annual Report on the JNCC website and inform Secretariat.

3.2. Ramsar Review (avian issues).

- 3.2.1. Proposals for the re-arrangement of groups dealing with Natura 2000 and Ramsar issues had been circulated to the Group by Defra in early September 2003. The proposals recommended that the SPA SWG should take over the avian element of the currently ongoing Ramsar Review (and become known as the **SPA and Ramsar avian issues sub-group (SRA-SG)**). Aim of new structure is to reduce overlap in workloads and improve the synchrony of actions relevant to different designated sites. The restructuring reflects the need to increase focus on management of the networks. In terms of the avian element of the Ramsar Review, this is a minor area of work compared to that of reviewing non-avian Ramsar issues and is considered appropriate for the SPA SWG to deal with. Defra aims to have the new structure of groups in place by Q1 of 2004/05.

- 3.2.2. The SPA SWG was broadly supportive of broadening its remit to include avian Ramsar issues, but requested that in order to more fully consider this that a better idea of the work involved and timetable would be needed. Defra agreed to provide this.
- 3.2.3. It was agreed that consideration of avian Ramsar issues in the Overseas Territories was not appropriate for the SPA SWG. Defra will deal with the OTs side through a separate project, but may request input from the SPA SWG in future after the current review. The latter was considered to be appropriate by the Group.
- 3.2.4. It was agreed that the priority work for the Group would remain Natura 2000, which reflects the needs of the devolved administrations, and that the Group's remit should not be broadened to consider Ramsar policy issues ('grey' issues being a possible exception; see SPA SWG Terms of Reference). In this latter context, the Group urged Defra to establish the NGO Forum to allow fuller discussions of policy outside of government/statutory agencies.
- 3.2.5. In relation to the proposed restructuring of the various groups, the SPA SWG agreed that it wished to remain the forum in which the science underpinning the development of the UK's marine SPAs was discussed between government, the agencies and the NGOs. A good working relationship with the JNCC Marine Project Group (an agency only group) had already been established and the Group has already made a significant contribution to marine SPA work.

Action Point 3: Secretariat to liaise with Defra over provision of a work plan and timetable for avian Ramsar issues, and circulate this to the Group for future consideration.

- 3.3. 1% thresholds for mixed populations of non-breeding waterbirds for use in the UK:**
action carried forward.

4. Marine SPAs: the EC Marine Experts Working Group

- 4.1. Defra gave a brief outline of the history of this group and its make-up. MS governments and NGOs are represented and three sub-groups operate, each covering different areas of work (see attached minutes of the first meeting of the group). The EU recognises the value of harmonizing approaches in the marine environment and so the group will cover all aspects of Natura 2000 implementation, including within territorial zones.
- 4.2. The role of the SPA SWG in informing the work of this group will be via advice to the JNCC Marine Project Group over SPAs. This latter group will then advise a new UK marine sub-group of the Natura 2000 Steering Group (to be established), which will in turn advise the EC Marine Experts Working Group.

Action Point 4: Secretariat to circulate the Terms of Reference of the EC Marine Experts Working Group and minutes of its meetings to the SPA SWG.

5. Marine SPAs: Draft guidelines for inshore SPAs for non-breeding waterbirds (JNCC presentation)

- 5.1. The draft guidelines for inshore seaduck and diver SPA site and boundary selection had been circulated to the Group prior to the meeting. Comments were sought before 7th October 2003 so that the JNCC Marine Project Group could discuss the advice of the SPA SWG at its next meeting.

- 5.2. Several issues were raised: how to handle small areas of high density away from main areas (satellites), use of high and low water marks for near-shore boundaries, and handling of disjunct main areas of high density.
- 5.3. It was suggested that a sensitivity analysis could be performed for each area, testing the robustness of the 'all data' boundary against the boundary that each individual survey would produce. Such an analysis could allow the 'all data' boundary to be refined if this was considered necessary.
- 5.4. The Group noted that in addition to identifying sites for seaducks/divers/grebes alone that consideration would be necessary of existing sites with <20,000 non-breeding waterbirds and whether, in cases where the number of open-water birds combined with other waterbirds exceeds 20,000, the area should be considered for assessment under Stage 1.3 of the SPA selection guidelines.
- 5.5. It was agreed that more guidance may be needed on what constitutes acceptable quality of the data used for site assessments, so as to enable a consistent approach across UK. However, it was also recognised that not all areas will have equal quality of data and that a degree of flexibility in data use will be necessary. The Group agreed that it was essential to identify where additional surveys would be required and to assess ways in which current surveys could be improved specifically for open-water species. It was noted that areas thought to be of high importance but with poorer quality data should not be neglected and if additional survey was necessary then a precautionary approach to their management in the interim would be needed.
- 5.6. The Group was informed that there was a current project on developing correction factors for improving population estimates from aerial counts (CCW funded). It was also noted that to aid in understanding flock dynamics and how to treat disjunct concentrations that a relatively simple analysis of movements could be done. At present a precautionary approach was being taken with disjunct aggregations; recognising larger boundaries to include these as a single site on the assumption that birds within these areas use the larger area as a single ecological unit.
- 5.7. The Group agreed that the general approach outlined in the draft guidelines was appropriate, although the RSPB reiterated its position on application of the two stages of the SPA selection guidelines (that 1% thresholds should be regarded as criteria, not guidelines, and that all sites meeting these should be selected for classification). It was agreed that boundaries modelled on distribution was an appropriate approach, but that shore-based surveys may in some cases be adequate for defining boundaries.
- 5.8. JNCC updated the Group on current progress with analysing aerial data: the Carmarthen Bay report had been finalised, the Tay/St. Andrews Bay analysis had been completed and a report drafted, and analysis of the Liverpool Bay data had begun (this would be completed and reported on by December 2003). It was noted that the Tay analysis had produced a slightly different approach to that used for Carmarthen Bay (98% rather than 95% cumulative density thresholds for boundary selection), and that ultimately each site may have a slightly different density threshold for boundary selection rather than there being a generic threshold for all sites. Of particular note, was that the density threshold of 98% in the Tay was consistently applicable to all of the species analysed.
- 5.9. The draft guidelines will not be published on the JNCC website.

Action Point 5: SPA SWG members to send comments on the draft guidelines for seaduck/diver SPAs to AW at JNCC by 7th October 2003.

6. Marine SPAs: Belfast Water – implications of changes to international thresholds (EHS briefing)

- 6.1. The EHS briefing was introduced by JNCC. Belfast Lough qualifies only for its internationally important redshank population. In the SPA Review it was suggested that there is also an internationally important assemblage of non-breeding waterbirds, but this was based on the larger WeBS area and not the classified SPA boundary; the SPA does not support more than 20,000 individual waterbirds. EHS is now considering the open water area adjacent, but given that the waterbird assemblage does not qualify is debating whether an open water SPA should be classified for great crested grebe as the lough supports the second largest population in the UK, albeit representative of only around 0.3% of the biogeographical population when compared against the new threshold in WPE3.
- 6.2. The Group suggested two options: extend the site to include the full extent of the area used by the waterbird assemblage, so maintaining great crested grebe as a Stage 1.3 qualifier and so allowing straight-forward extension into the marine environment to cover its needs, or if this is inappropriate from a biological perspective selecting the site at Stage 1.4 for great crested grebe given that it supports second the largest population in UK and also meets other stage 2 judgements.
- 6.3. This paper will not be published on the JNCC website.

Action Point 6: EHS to report back to Group in future on status of Belfast Lough SPA once a decision has been made on how to progress.

7. Marine SPAs: Update on ESAS data analysis (JNCC)

- 7.1. JNCC gave a very quick update on progress with analysing the ESAS data to underpin development of SPA approaches in the 'offshore' marine environment. There is a possibility that the analytical work could be undertaken as part of another DTI funded project, but this was not confirmed. If the data are analysed in this way it could be reported in summer 2004. The analysis would be similar to that used by Skov *et al.*, but updated and essentially a kriging technique.

Species Items

8. Chough – site level interpretation of national survey results (RSPB briefing)

- 8.1. RSPB introduced a detailed briefing. The UK population had risen from 267 pairs in 1992 to 347 in 2002; the qualifying level therefore remained the same as that used in the SPA Review at 3 pairs. Around 39% of the UK population was identified as being in the SPA network by the Review. The inclusion of all areas supporting three or more pairs ($\geq 1\%$ GB) in the SPA network would increase this coverage to about 74%. RSPB considers the current coverage to be inadequate. SNH requested that the detailed survey data underpinning these results be forwarded so that the above re-evaluation and recommendations can be considered in detail.
- 8.2. CCW stated that ringing data had demonstrated that apparently disjunct sites can be used by a single group of birds and suggested that a new approach involving extension of existing sites to include ecologically linked smaller sites may be worth further consideration. Also, data have shown a link between breeding and non-breeding areas and these should perhaps also be linked. There is a good argument for a fuller analysis of ringing data.

- 8.3. The Group agreed that guidance would be needed on how composite sites should be identified and boundaries selected. The Group had previously agreed (September 2003; item 11) that this should be done on a site-by-site basis, but this would prove too resource hungry and a more generic approach may now be more appropriate.
- 8.4. Concern over the viability of some of the smaller site populations was raised; although some sites may support over 1% of the British population these are still very small numbers of birds and not all would be the most suitable for SPA classification, for example those that are functionally isolated from others may be less important than those that help support a larger meta-population.
- 8.5. The question of a 'network target' was raised – if 39% is too small then what would be a suitable target to satisfy obligations under the Birds Directive? The figure produced from adding populations in all sites supporting 1% or more of the British population is 74%. The RSPB restated its view that there is an obligation to classify all sites that satisfy the Stage 1 SPA Selection Guidelines, unless it could be shown that this produced representation that was above the protective requirements of the species concerned; in the latter case, Stage 2 judgements could be used to identify the best sites to classify in order to meet an agreed 'network target'. Some members of the Group considered that assessment of a 'network target' could not be done in the short-term, especially given that a valuable part of this assessment would be the analysis of existing data to explore functional links between sites and groups of sites.
- 8.6. The Group discussed the inclusion of populations that depended on buildings as nest sites. All agreed that this issue was of less concern than habitat management, but while some members thought that maintenance of buildings was a minor issue that should not detract from selecting such sites as SPAs, others thought that the SPA selection guidelines were useful in helping prioritise selection of more natural sites (i.e. where birds nest in natural sites).
- 8.7. The Group agreed two actions:
- 8.7.1. Agencies to consider RSPB's site-level report based on the 2002 national survey, continue bilateral discussions and then report back to the Group in May 2004.
- 8.7.2. RSPB was invited to use Chough as an example in writing to Defra on the application of the UK SPA Selection Guidelines.
- 8.8. The RSPB paper will not be published on the JNCC website as it has not been peer reviewed and is due to be published elsewhere. However, once published a summary version will be added to the JNCC website.

Action Point 7: Agencies to consider RSPB site-level analysis of the 2002 national Chough survey, continue bilateral discussions and report back to the Group in May 2004.

Action Point 8: RSPB was invited to use Chough as an example in writing to Defra on the application of the UK SPA Selection Guidelines.

9. Status of Little Egret in the UK (presentation from Dr. Andy Musgrove, BTO)

- 9.1. The population of wintering little egrets in the UK increased rapidly and steadily through the 1990s, with no recent sign of slowing; WeBS data show an increase from c. 200 birds in 1993 to c. 1,400 in 2001. The increase in birds has coincided with recovery of the species in France. The non-breeding population was estimated to be 1,650 birds in 1999, but at the

current rate of increase could rise to over 5,000 by 2006. Although most little egrets winter in southern and south-west England, birds are now regular in Wales and as far north as Lancashire and the Humber. Twelve sites now regularly hold more than 50 little egrets outside of the breeding season. First confirmed breeding was in 1996 at one location in southern England, but over 100 pairs, in 16 colonies, are estimated to have attempted to breed in 2001. Just one of these colonies, the longest occupied, is showing signs that numbers have stabilised. The breeding range has increased both inland and northward.

- 9.2. The Group questioned whether little egret should still be listed in Annex I to the Birds Directive given that it is now much more abundant and widespread than at the time of its original inclusion. JNCC commented that the issue of Annex revision has been raised in the ORNIS Committee, but that as yet no timetable had been agreed and that there may be some reluctance given that some Member States are yet to fully implement the Directive.
- 9.3. The Group agree that further SPA provision for little egret is not a high priority given the current high rate of population and range expansion and difficulty in identifying the most suitable areas for classification as SPAs. In addition, sites with the longest occupancy history and larger non-breeding populations are already classified, which also confers protection to breeding birds in these sites.
- 9.4. It was agreed that another review should be undertaken in 4-6 years time to assess whether the population had stabilised and sites could be identified. Surveys were discussed briefly and it was concluded that WeBS probably provides adequate coverage for non-breeding birds, but that breeding birds were not systematically surveyed at present – one solution might be to formally include little egret in the BTO Heronries survey and Dr. Musgrove agreed to discuss this possibility with colleagues at BTO.

Action Point 9: SPA SWG to review the status of little egret and SPA provision for it in 2007-2009.

General Items II

10. CHIP – draft discussion report (JNCC)

- 10.1. DAS introduced the draft discussion report on phase I of the Cropped Habitats Information Project. The report presents the individual species accounts and an initial attempt to briefly interpret these in relation to SPA provision. However, it was stated that this report was very much intended to invite debate from the Group and was not a position statement from JNCC. Comments on the report were requested by the end of November 2003, along with recommendations for which species should be covered in phase II of the project. It was agreed that the BTO should be invited to comment on the phase I report.
- 10.2. The Group agree that development of a decision making procedure would be very useful as it would improve consistency. However, it was recognised that there would be specific site related issues that could also influence decisions.

Action Point 10: Group members to send comments on the phase I CHIP report to JNCC by the end of November 2003, along with recommendations for species coverage in phase II of the project.

Action Point 11: JNCC to invite comments from BTO on the draft CHIP discussion report with a deadline of end November 2003.

11. Bilateral discussions

- 11.1. Nothing reported for Northern Ireland.
- 11.2. Nothing reported for Wales from either CCW or RSPB.
- 11.3. The Chief Executive of SNH and the Director of RSPB Scotland had met in the summer and agreed to focus on 12 high priority sites meeting Stage 1 of the SPA selection guidelines and 12 other sites for possible extension. Staff from each organisation had met in July 2003 to further discuss these 24 cases and data collation. This progress had then stalled pending a decision from the Natura 2000 and Ramsar Steering Committee on the Stage 2 application issue identified by the RSPB. The RSPB was extremely disappointed in this (not all of the 24 cases are reliant on this decision e.g. Lake of Menteith and Slamannan). One site proposed by the RSPB – the Oa, Islay – would be considered in light of the RSPB site level analysis of the 2002 national chough survey (see item 8 above).
- 11.4. EN reported little discussion. It is working on data collation for those sites proposed previously by RSPB and also awaiting some analyses from RSPB. RSPB noted that it had made an official complaint to the EC over the proposed Shell Flats windfarm development. RSPB is also finalising its England IBA/SPA project report.

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

- 12.1. JNCC informed the Group that it was planning a stakeholder meeting to launch the Common Standards Monitoring guidance – this would be in late 2003 or early 2004. After this launch the guidance could be considered by the Group; JNCC agreed to brief the Group on CSM at the meeting following launch.
- 12.2. Defra indicated that it considered publication of the Group's Annual Reports in each year to be appropriate after the Natura 2000 Steering Group had had the opportunity to review it.

13. Information papers

- 13.1. A paper on the population status of the Ring Ouzel had been circulated to the Group before the meeting. The Group agreed to take a decision on the relevant 1% biogeographical threshold for the UK at its January 2004 meeting.

Action Point 12: Group to decide, in January 2004, the relevant 1% biogeographical threshold for Ring Ouzel for use in UK.

14. Dates and venues of next meetings

- 14.1. 28th January 2004, hosted by EHS, Belfast (details TBC).
- 14.2. 26th May 2004, RSPB, Sandy (venue is confirmed).

Attachments:

Approved minutes of the 7th May 2003 meeting (2003/2).
Minutes of the first meeting of the EC Marine Experts Working Group.

UK SPA SCIENTIFIC WORKING GROUP

MEETING 2003/3, 23RD SEPTEMBER 2003

Action Point Summary

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

Actions from this meeting to be discharged prior to 28th January 2004 meeting (see minutes of last meeting also):

(Papers to be submitted to secretariat by 9th January 2004)

Action Point 1: Group members to send Defra any further comments on application of the SPA Selection Guidelines by 18th October 2003.

Action Point 2: Defra to check with the Chair of the Natura 2000 Steering Group whether it would be appropriate to publish the response to the SPA SWG Annual Report on the JNCC website and inform Secretariat.

Action Point 3: Secretariat to liaise with Defra over provision of a work plan and timetable for avian Ramsar issues, and circulate this to the Group for future consideration.

Action Point 4: Secretariat to circulate the Terms of Reference of the EC Marine Experts Working Group and minutes of its meetings to the SPA SWG.

Action Point 5: SPA SWG members to send comments on the draft guidelines for seaduck/diver SPAs to AW at JNCC by 7th October 2003.

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Action Point 11: JNCC to invite comments from BTO on draft CHIP discussion report with a deadline of end November 2003.

Action Point 12: Group to decide, in January 2004, the relevant 1% biogeographical threshold for Ring Ouzel for use in UK.

Actions from this meeting to be discharged prior to 28th May 2004 meeting or another future meeting (see minutes of last meeting also):

Action Point 7: Agencies to consider RSPB site-level analysis of the 2002 national chough survey, continue bilateral discussions and report back to the Group in May 2004.

Action Point 9: SPA SWG to review the status of little egret and SPA provision for it in 2007-2009.