

LOUGH NEAGH

Views About Management The Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002 Article 28(2)

A statement of Environment and Heritage Service's views about the management of Lough Neagh Area of Special Scientific Interest ("the ASSI")

This statement represents the views of Environment and Heritage Service about the management of the ASSI for nature conservation. This statement sets out, in principle, our views on how the area's special conservation interest can be conserved and enhanced. Environment and Heritage Service has a duty to notify the owners and occupiers of the ASSI of its views about the management of the land.

Not all of the management principles will be equally appropriate to all parts of the ASSI and there may be other management activities, additional to our current views, which can be beneficial to the conservation and enhancement of the features of interest. It is also very important to recognise that management may need to change with time.

The management views set out below do not constitute consent for any operation or activity. The written consent of Environment and Heritage Service is still required before carrying out any operation or activity likely to damage the features of special interest (see the Schedule on pages 3 and 4 for a list of these operations and activities). Environment and Heritage Service welcomes consultation with owners, occupiers and users of the ASSI to ensure that the management of this area maintains and enhances the features of interest, and to ensure that all necessary prior consents are obtained.

MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES

Wintering Waterbirds

Lough Neagh ASSI is a wintering site for large numbers of migratory waterbirds. It supports internationally important populations of waterbirds including Great Crested Grebe, Whooper Swan, Pochard, Tufted Duck, Scaup, Goldeneye and Golden Plover together with numbers of Little Grebe, Great Cormorant, Mute Swan, Greylag Goose, Shelduck, Wigeon, Teal, Gadwall, Mallard, Shoveler, Coot and Lapwing that are significant in an all-Ireland context.

Swans, geese, ducks and waders are attracted by a rich food supply and secure roost sites. Wildfowl make use of both open water and surrounding open habitats, particularly wet grassland, for feeding. Aquatic vegetation and invertebrates are important food sources for many ducks while swans, geese and some ducks obtain a proportion of their food on land. Waders such as Lapwing and Golden Plover feed predominantly on worms, insects and other invertebrates in wet grasslands. The quality of feeding areas is, however, susceptible to the influence of operations undertaken both within and outside the ASSI that may result in pollution or changes in water quality or



unacceptable levels of disturbance to feeding birds. It is therefore important that damaging practices are minimised around the ASSI.

Secure roost sites, free from disturbance, are essential to allow the birds to conserve energy when not feeding. Some of these roosts may lie outside the ASSI. Undisturbed roosts are particularly important during severe winter weather. Wildfowl usually roost on open water, while waders tend to use islands or isolated headlands. The variety of habitats present within the ASSI should be managed in order to safeguard the wintering waterbird population.

Specific objectives include:

Feeding habitats – it is important to maintain the quality and extent of habitat used for feeding by the birds, in particular the open water and surrounding reedbed, fen and grassland where present.

Disturbance around known roost sites and frequently used feeding areas should be minimised.

Breeding Waterbird Assemblage

Lough Neagh ASSI supports numbers of breeding waterbirds, especially Great Crested Grebe, that are significant in an all-Ireland context. Maintenance of these populations is dependent upon the extent and condition of undisturbed vegetation that provides cover for nests, especially reedbeds, swamps, areas of tall fen and shoreline wet woodland. Islands can be particularly important nesting sites as these are often safe from land-based predators such as foxes. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance or enhancement of habitat used for nesting and the implementation of measures to minimise disturbance of such areas.

Specific objectives include:

Nesting habitats for waterbirds, especially reedbeds, swamps, areas of tall fen and wet woodland, should be maintained and, where possible, extended.

Human disturbance to waterbirds breeding on islands should be minimised by discouraging landing at nesting sites through appropriate signage or by creating marked "buffer zones" to prevent close approach by boats and other craft. Access to nesting sites on the mainland shoreline should be restricted, where possible, during the breeding season.

Breeding Common Tern

Lough Neagh ASSI supports internationally important numbers of breeding Common Terns. These migratory seabirds are present between April and September and feed on fish in inshore waters. Breeding terns are highly susceptible to disturbance and predation and consequently often choose to nest on islands or isolated man-made structures surrounded by water. They are particularly attracted to areas of shingle or broken shells. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance or enhancement of habitat or structures used for nesting by terns.

Specific objectives include:

Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance or enhancement of sites currently used by breeding terns and the creation of potential new sites. Shingle areas should not be allowed to become overgrown. Nest sites can be extended, or new sites created, by provision of a layer of broken shells. Chick survival would be enhanced by creating shelter structures within the breeding sites to provide refuges from aerial predators or inclement weather. Such activities should only be undertaken in consultation with Environment and Heritage Service.

Human disturbance to breeding terns should be minimised by discouraging landing at nesting sites through appropriate signage or creating marked "buffer zones" to prevent close approach by boats and other craft.

Species-rich wet grassland and breeding waders

Species-rich wet grassland is an important habitat for wildlife. The wet grassland in the ASSI is also notable for the rare plants, important invertebrate communities and breeding birds that it supports. The latter include concentration of breeding waders (Snipe, Lapwing, Curlew and Redshank) in parts of the site. Such important concentrations of breeding waders have become scarce in Northern Ireland.

Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance and enhancement of the wet grassland through the conservation of its associated native plants and animals. In general, sensitive management of the habitat should ensure that its component communities of plants and animals are protected.

Many of the more sensitive plant species can be quickly lost through intensive management treatments such as fertiliser and herbicide application. However, grassland generally needs some management to retain its interest. Although occasional small patches of scrub can be valuable in providing additional habitat niches for birds and invertebrates, in the absence of management, coarse grasses can quickly take over and ultimately woody species may become dominant.

Grazing by cattle is the most effective way of controlling the growth of more vigorous plant species and helping to maintain open areas and a diverse sward structure, which also benefits breeding waders. In the absence of grazing, cutting of the vegetation to create open areas and reduce the dominance of coarse grasses and rushes is desirable.

There are some specific management practices relating to factors, such as vegetation structure, grazing levels, soil moisture and predators, that are of particular importance for breeding waders. For example, limited rush cover can help provide good habitat for breeding waders, while heavy infestations can mean that shorter areas useful for feeding are lost. Rush-topping may be necessary.

Sward height is also important. This often determines which species of wader will make use of the area, with longer vegetation attracting Snipe and short vegetation being more suitable for Lapwing. Use of fertiliser should be discouraged, as this can increase early season grass growth, thus reducing the suitability of the site for waders such as Lapwing, which prefer shorter swards. Such use also means livestock could move onto the land early, at high stocking rates, which would increase the risk of trampling of nests.

The breeding productivity of ground nesting waders can be reduced by the presence of tall hedges or mature trees in the immediate vicinity of the nest site as they provide lookouts and nest sites for predators such as Hooded Crow.

Specific objectives include:

Low intensity grazing has contributed to the conservation and enhancement of the features of interest. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the continuation of this practice.

Prevent the loss of more sensitive grassland plant species and breeding waders through the control of scrub, bracken and rushes. In general, maintaining a species-rich sward that is also suitable for breeding waders can be achieved through the appropriate grazing regime. In some cases other methods of control, such as cutting or rush-topping, may be required. Such activities must not be carried out during the wader breeding season.

Maintain the diversity and quality of the species-rich grassland by ensuring there is no application of fertiliser, slurry or herbicide to the site.

Where appropriate, encourage the blocking of drains to prevent the grassland from drying out.

Limited scrub and tree management may be required as appropriate to deter predators such as Hooded Crow.

Wet Woodland

Wet woodland is an important habitat for wildlife. It provides food and shelter for a wide variety of mammals, birds and invertebrates.

Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance and enhancement of the woodland through the development of its structure and the conservation of its associated native plants and animals. These include higher plants of limited distribution within Northern Ireland and important invertebrate communities.

Specific objectives include:

Encourage the woodland to become more "mature" by avoiding disturbance to the trees. The structure of the wood will gradually become more diverse, with well-developed canopy, shrub and ground layers, and an abundance of species like Ivy, mosses, liverworts and lichens that live on the trees themselves.

Encourage the retention of dead wood both on the woodland floor and still standing in the canopy. Dead wood is a very important habitat for some of the less conspicuous woodland species, such as fungi and invertebrates.

Encourage regeneration of woodland and discourage damage to trees and shrubs through the control of grazing and browsing. In general, natural regeneration is preferable to planting.

Increases in the nutrient status of the water and underlying peat soils can lead to a decline in some of the more valuable plant communities. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance of good water quality through the control of pollution and artificial enrichment.

Where necessary, encourage the blocking of drains to prevent the wood from drying out.

Fens and Swamps

Fens and swamps are important habitats for wildlife. They develop on the fringes of open water and represent a stage in the process of succession from open water to dry land. Swamps often consist of a single dominant plant species (such as reeds, sedges, or bulrushes), with a few other plants growing amongst them whilst fens are often very diverse and rich in species. The Lough contains a number of different fen and swamp vegetation communities. Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance and enhancement of the fen and swamp through the conservation of these communities and their associated native plants and animals. These include higher plants of limited distribution within Northern Ireland and important invertebrate communities.

Fen vegetation requires water levels to be at, or just below, the surface all year round, while swamps generally occur in slightly deeper water. Increases in the nutrient status of the water and underlying peat soils can lead to the dominance of species, such as Bulrush, at the expense of other, more important plant communities. Therefore it is important to maintain good water-quality.

Fen and swamp communities are susceptible to successional change and generally need some management to retain their interest. In the absence of management, coarse grasses such as Common Reed can quickly spread from the swamp into the fen and ultimately, woody species may become dominant. Over a period of time, these species may shade out more important plant communities and cause the fen to dry out. Occasional small patches of scrub can be valuable in providing additional habitat niches for birds and invertebrates, but widespread conversion of fen and swamp to wet woodland would generally be undesirable.

Low intensity summer grazing by cattle (or ponies) that are more adaptable to wet conditions is the most effective way of controlling the growth of more vigorous species and helping to maintain species-rich fen vegetation and a diverse sward structure. In the absence of grazing, cutting and removal of the vegetation to create open areas and reduce the dominance of coarse grasses is desirable.

Specific objectives include:

Where appropriate, Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the blocking of drains to prevent the vegetation from drying out.

Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the maintenance of good water quality through the control of pollution and artificial enrichment.

Where feasible, Environment and Heritage Service would encourage the grazing of fen and swamp although overgrazing should be avoided as the wet soils are particularly susceptible to poaching. Where grazing is not possible other

management practices, such as cutting, may be used, especially on extensive stands of reedbed.

In general, the control of scrub within fen and swamp communities can be achieved through the appropriate grazing regime. In some cases additional scrub control may be required.

Freshwater Fish Assemblage

Lough Neagh supports an important freshwater fish assemblage which includes the largest population of Pollen in Ireland, one of a handful of known European populations of non-migratory River Lamprey and the Dollaghan, a form of brown trout thought to be unique to the lough.

Environment and Heritage Service recognises the important economic and social roles of fishing and welcomes sustainable fishery management that is sensitive to the special interests of the ASSI.

Specific objectives include:

Environment and Heritage would promote the protection of spawning grounds of the three named fish species both in the lake and its tributary rivers and ensure migratory routes to and from spawning grounds are kept open and free of artificial barriers.

Management principles applicable to all habitats throughout the site

Environment and Heritage Service would encourage all activities associated with site maintenance, management, access and recreation to be undertaken in a sensitive manner that ensures disturbance to the site and its wildlife is minimised.

Discourage non-native species, especially those that tend to spread at the expense of native wildlife.

Maintain the diversity and quality of habitats associated with the main habitats, such as open water and scrub, through sensitive management. These adjoining habitats can often be very important for wildlife, especially breeding birds, invertebrates and rare plants.



E Diane Stevenson
Authorised Officer

Dated the 01st of February 2008