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JOINT NATURE CONSERVATION COMMITTEE

COMMON STANDARDS MONITORING - PROGRESS WITH THE SECOND ROUND OF MONITORING AND QUALITY ASSURANCE OF RESULTS

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 The country conservation agencies commenced implementation of Common Standards Monitoring in April 1999 following a year long field trial in 1998. The first six year cycle was completed in March 2005. JNCC published the results of this in June 2006, and subsequently worked to create papers on lessons learnt (JNCC 06 P19), and advice to Government (JNCC 07 P01).
- 1.2 In parallel, the country agencies have continued with implementation of the monitoring. The second monitoring cycle is scheduled to complete by March 2011. The end of the current financial year will therefore mark a halfway point in the second six year cycle. In practice, because the first cycle was not complete (57% of assessments undertaken), it was expected that part of the work of the second cycle would be to initially focus on features which were not assessed in the first cycle. It is nevertheless timely to take stock of progress made in the last two and a half years. In addition, it is also timely to consider what needs to be done to assure the quality of the results.
- 1.3 Following agreement by the Chief Scientists Group to put a paper to this meeting, JNCC requested data on progress from Country Agency Monitoring Leads on 30 November 2007. Due to the timescales for this paper, they were asked to provide a summary set of information by 17 December 2007, and a full set of data by 18 January 2008.

2. Assessments completed as at end December 2007

- 2.1 The details in Table 1 are based on the data provided by country agencies in January 2008. SNH, CCW and Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) provided full datasets of all assessments undertaken to date, distinguishing between first and second assessments.
- 2.2 Natural England stated that resources did not allow provision of the data on the timescales requested as, unfortunately, JNCC's request clashed with urgent other work. For England the data are therefore based on a collation undertaken in January 2007 and used as part of the Habitats Directive report. However, JNCC was informed by email that 14% of Natural England's unit assessments are now more than one financial year overdue. Only a small area

has not been monitored, but there are issues about which Natural England are concerned - in terms of presentation of results; NE makes assessments of site units, and JNCC needs to present data on the condition of features.

- 2.3 EHS stated that all features on Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs) declared before April 2002 will be assessed by 31 March 2008. So the first cycle will be completed in full. A report on the state of Northern Ireland's ASSIs will be produced by June 2008. Since Northern Ireland only initiated its condition assessment programme in 2002, only 4 second assessments have been made.
- 2.4 The number of assessments required is based on figures provided by each agency for the six-year report. Features ascribed to cross-border sites have been added to the number to be assessed by both countries. This may lead to a small over estimation of the number of features to be assessed.
- 2.5 The total number of features estimated as requiring assessment over the six year period for Ramsar sites relates to avian features only - there are also a few habitat features, and this probably explains why Northern Ireland have made more assessments than their estimated Ramsar total.
- 2.6 Similarly, for Special Protection Areas (SPA) sites, for Northern Ireland, it appears that each of the species comprising waterbird assemblages have been assessed, resulting in more assessments than anticipated.

3. Assessments since the six-year report

- 3.1 3,153 Common Standards Monitoring assessments have been completed between April 2005 and December 2008. Of these 538 are second assessments, and 2,615 first assessments completed since the six year report. This is an underestimate due to the lack of 2007 data from Natural England. The vast majority of the second assessments reported have been completed by SNH. The figures reported are summarised in Table 1 (attached). Assessments made by Natural England since April 2005 were not differentiated into first or second assessments. In table 1, JNCC has allocated these to the first assessment column, though a proportion are likely to have been second assessments.
- 3.2 Although, they are behind schedule in their assessments, Natural England will have completed a significant number of further assessments during 2007. A reasonable estimate might be that Natural England has undertaken up to an additional 800 assessments during 2007. If this is the case, many of these are likely to be second assessments.
- 3.3 Based on Table 1, 62.1% of features have now been assessed for the first time. Ramsar features were not included in the 57% of assessments completed in the first round (referred to in paragraph 1.2 above). If Ramsar sites are excluded from Table 1, the comparable figure now is 63%.
- 3.4 If the estimated 800 assessments for England are attributed as second assessments, the total of second assessments is 5.9% to date.

- 3.5 Again, assuming an additional 800 assessments for England in 2007, the total of assessments undertaken in the second round to date is estimated as 3,953 or 17.3% of the total, which approximates to 38% for a full six year period. Put simply, monitoring appears to be only just over one third of what would be required to complete assessments over a six year period.
- 3.6 However, the picture is more optimistic than this if two issues can be addressed. Firstly, CCW (shown as having reported on only 13.2% of their designated features in Table 1), have, in fact, assessed the great majority of their Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and SPA features. Since most of these features are also Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and/or Ramsar features, re-assessment of the SSSI and Ramsar features from monitoring which has already taken place could be undertaken.
- 3.7 Secondly, Natural England have not, to date, reported on many species SSSI, SPA or Ramsar features, notwithstanding that the great majority of the area of the sites on which the features occur has been monitored. In fact, Natural England has undertaken monitoring on over 99% of the area of its SSSI, but has difficulty in reporting on all of this area at the level of individual features. This is because Natural England information is held on the basis of management units and has not yet developed all the procedures and facilities to report at the feature level unambiguously. Natural England has undertaken to investigate with JNCC how this can be resolved over the summer of 2008.
- 3.8 If the action referred to in paragraphs 3.6 and 3.7 above is undertaken, the overall proportion of first time assessments could rise rapidly to above the 80% level. Without them, progress will be very slow.
- 3.9 However, even making allowance for the improvements in reporting referred to above, the current rate of site monitoring in the second monitoring round (since April 2005) seems to be running at between 65-70% of that in the first round and no better than 50% of what would be required to achieve full reporting of designated features over a 6 year period. SNH had previously advised that, for cost reasons, they needed to take a risk-assessment approach to monitoring and to reduce the overall rate from that in the third round. However, the current monitoring rate appears to reflect a general loss of momentum.

4. Implications

- 4.1 There are a number of implications of the information above:
- i. the best reporting is on SAC features. The next Habitats Directive report is due in 2013, and it will cover the period 2007-2012. It is almost certain that there will a requirement to assess the status of species and habitats listed on the Directive's annexes, including both on sites and in the wider countryside, to assess the level of improvement since the 2007 report. There is also likely to be a requirement to report in more detail on site management - this may include a requirement on report on the effectiveness of that management. There is, therefore, a continuing high level driver for Common Standard Monitoring assessments of SAC features, and a

need for better information about such features in the wider countryside;

- ii. in Scotland and Northern Ireland, substantial progress has been made towards completing the first assessments for all features on all site types. In England and Wales, full reporting on the features is dependent on resolving the issues raised in paragraphs 3.6 and 3.7 above. Unless these improvements are achieved it will not be possible to report on the full list of designated features. These issues were previously raised in JNCC paper JNCC 06 P19;
- iii. the rate of monitoring achieved is only between one third and one half of that needed to providing a complete report on the designated features. In other words, we are currently working to a reporting cycle of between 12 and 15 years. Resource constraints are a major problem for all the country agencies, and these are likely to continue. Nonetheless, the loss of monitoring momentum compared to the third round appears high.

5. Quality Assurance - Next Steps

- 5.1 In response to a July 2005 request from Chief Scientists to develop a quality assurance work programme, the Inter-Agency Monitoring Group considered the issue several times and in July 2006, monitoring leads from each country agreed that pulling together existing country quality assurance practices as part of a coherent UK programme of work would be advantageous in helping JNCC and the agencies to work together on the current six year monitoring cycle, to benefit from each others experiences and to compare results. It would also be a relatively quick and easy thing to do in the short term and would prepare well for starting to implement a more coherent quality assurance work programme.
- 5.2 The various strands of quality assurance work being undertaken by the country conservation agencies underpin any coherent UK programme. Monitoring leads recommended that a collation and documentation of agency work should be undertaken by JNCC as soon as possible and then used to inform further work.
- 5.3 Quality assurance requires several strands of relatively independent work. These are:
 - i. procedural compliance. Assessing the extent to which operational procedures have been followed;
 - ii. validation of condition assessments. Estimating the likelihood of making mistakes in feature assessments through:
 - a. inconsistencies between agency approaches (setting conservation objectives, monitoring procedures and methods, reporting);

- b. failure to collect adequate information about the feature to make the correct assessment of condition.

- 5.4 None of the work to collate ongoing agency quality assurance practices has started yet. A request to countries for information was sent out in 2006 but it was not followed up and very little information was received. This remains the essential starting activity which needs to be carried out as a pre-cursor to the development and implementation of a more coherent quality assurance work programme. JNCC intends to reinvigorate this task and present a summary collation of agency quality assurance practices to Committee in September 2008. The summary collation will be used to propose an outline quality assurance work programme for the UK that Committee will be asked to consider.

- 5.5 JNCC will:
 - i. produce a collation of agency procedures for carrying out the monitoring including any quality assurance work and plans for the second six year cycle by mid-May 2008;
 - ii. undertake a desk analysis of agency procedures and to produce a report on commonality, inconsistencies, best practices and opportunities for improvement. After initial analysis a workshop in June 2008 is envisaged in order to extract and confirm the main messages for the final report by end of July 2008.

- 5.6 Quality assurance of marine monitoring is being undertaken independently by the marine monitoring group. It is recommended that this work is documented and collated as part of the planned collation and desk analysis activities.

Table 1. Summary of Common Standards Monitoring assessments reported to JNCC as at end December 2007.

		To be assessed	First Assessments to March 2005	First Assessments from April 2005	Total first assessments	% Assessed	Second Assessments
EHS	ASSI	904	515	136	651	72.0%	4
	SAC	150	43	52	95	63.3%	
	SPA	46	90		90	195.7%	
	Ramsar	25	26		26	104.0%	Data from 2007 collation
		1125	674	188	862	76.6%	4
CCW	SSSI	2604			0	0.0%	
	SAC	384	146	216	362	94.3%	11
	SPA	60	42	1	43	71.7%	
	Ramsar	31			0	0.0%	
		3079	188	217	405	13.2%	11
SNH	SSSI	3787	3499	57	3556	93.9%	442
	SAC	885	785	32	817	92.3%	49
	SPA	595	572	2	574	96.5%	27
	Ramsar	167	154		154	92.2%	5
		5434	5010	91	5101	93.9%	523
EN / NE	SSSI	11414	5384	1701	7085	62.1%	Data from 2007 collation
	SAC	800	306	418	724	90.5%	Data from 2007 collation
	SPA	638			0	0.0%	
	Ramsar	339			0	0.0%	
		13191	5690	2119	7809	59.2%	Unknown
UK	A/SSSI	18709	9398	1894	11292	60.4%	446
	SAC	2219	1280	718	1998	90.0%	60
	SPA	1339	704	3	707	52.8%	27
	Ramsar	562	180	0	180	32.0%	5
		22829	11562	2615	14177	62.1%	538