

UK SPA SCIENTIFIC WORKING GROUP

MEETING 2003/2

7TH MAY 2003

09.30 - 15.30 RSPB Scotland HQ, Edinburgh

Approved Minutes

Present (around table):

Ian Bainbridge (Chair) - SEERAD

Ben Fraser (BF) - EN

Nigel Buxton (NB) – SNH

Andy Webb (AW) - JNCC

David Mallon (DM) – SEERAD

Ian Enlander (IE) – DOE(NI)

Jeremy Wilson (JW) - Scottish Environment
Link

James Robinson (JR) – WWT

Helen Baker (HB) (Secretary) - JNCC

Geoff Audcent (GA) - Defra

Louise Vall (LV) - Defra

David Stroud (DAS) – JNCC

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

Chris Spray (Water UK)

Sian Whitehead (CCW) – by video link

Apologies:

Trevor Salmon (DEFRA), David Smallshire (DEFRA), Jill Thomas (NAW), Colin Hedley (CLA), Andrew Clark (NFU), Stephen Hull (ABPmer), Lucy Adams (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 (29th January 2003, 2003/1)

2.1. Two minor amendments were agreed:

2.1.1. Under 10.4, it was noted that mute swans from the Western Isles make regular movements to and from Ireland.

2.1.2. Under 11.4, the first sentence should be read as 'EN is currently consulting on a proposed extension to the Stour and Orwell Estuaries SPA'.

2.2. The Group approved the minutes with these minor amendments.

General items I

3. Annual Report

3.1. The Chair informed the Group of the process of dissemination of the Annual Report once finalised; he will present the report in person at the July meeting of the Natura 2000 Steering Group and provide feedback from discussions to the Group in September 2003.

3.2. The Natura 2000 Steering Group also requested that a resume of the preceding meeting and a draft agenda for the following meeting of the SPA SWG be produced and sent to Defra for

circulation prior to Natura 2000 Steering Group meetings. Defra agreed to keep the SPA SWG Secretariat informed of meeting dates for the Natura 2000 Steering Group and the Natura 2000 NGO Liaison Group.

- 3.3. The role of the Natura 2000 NGO Liaison Group was again queried. Defra stated that this forum would now be merged with that from the Ramsar side and that terms of reference would be established by the Natura 2000 Steering Group in July. The Chair agreed to provide feedback to the Group on this issue at the September 2003 meeting.
- 3.4. Specific comments on the Annual Report were noted by the Secretariat.
- 3.5. It was agreed that clarity was needed with respect to the Group's role in considering and advising on the influence of wider countryside management/policy on the SPA network. As a first step it would be valuable to have a greater understanding of Common Standards Monitoring, including reporting obligations, and the Group agreed to request a briefing from JNCC – Secretariat to pursue this.
- 3.6. Defra informed the Group of the establishment of the EU Marine Working Group, in which they are represented, which will take forward development of guidance for marine SPAs in the offshore environment (12-200 nm). The Group agreed that the inshore/offshore division was arbitrary and that its consideration of the science underpinning the selection of SPAs in the marine environment should be generic. The Chair agreed to discuss the role of the new marine group with Defra and provide feedback to the Group in September 2003.
- 3.7. The process for finalising and approving the Annual Report was agreed: Secretariat to make changes to report to reflect today's discussion and circulate a revised version by 19th May 2003; Group members to provide final comments to Secretariat by 1st June 2003; Secretariat to circulate final version for approval by 15th June 2003; Group to indicate approval by 25th June 2003.

Action Point 1: Secretariat to produce a resume of each meeting and draft agenda for the subsequent meeting to send to Defra for circulation to the Natura 2000 Steering Group.

Action Point 2: Defra to keep SPA SWG Secretariat informed of meeting dates for the Natura 2000 Steering Group and the Natura 2000 NGO Liaison Group.

Action Point 3: Secretariat to solicit briefing on Common Standards Monitoring, including reporting obligations, from JNCC.

Action point 4: Chair to discuss role of the EU Marine Working Group with Defra and feedback to the Group in September 2003.

Action Point 5: Secretariat to make changes to Annual Report to reflect comments at May meeting and circulate a revised version by 19th May 2003; Group members to provide final comments to Secretariat by 1st June 2003; Secretariat to circulate final version for approval by 15th June 2003; Group to indicate approval by 25th June 2003.

4. International 1% thresholds for non-breeding waterbirds for use by UK [from WPE3] (JNCC briefing)

- 4.1. DAS circulated a revised table of estimates of relevance to the UK taken from the third edition of *Waterbird Population Estimates* (WPE3) (now available from the Wetlands International website [www.wetlands.org]). Treatment of eider and goosander populations

will be presented in September 2003. Main issue is thresholds for mixed populations, e.g. waders during passage. Group members were asked to comment on thresholds by 1st June so that JNCC could then finalise recommendations for submission to the Natura 2000 Steering Group.

4.2. This briefing will not be published on the JNCC website until finalised.

Action Point 6: Group members to comment on threshold use for mixed populations of non-breeding waterbirds in the UK to JNCC by 1st June 2003. JNCC to produce recommendations for the Natura 2000 Steering Group.

5. Non-estuarine waterbirds

5.1. JW presented a summary of comments on BTO Report #272:

- Good synthesis of occurrence of five species on non-estuarine coasts.
- Underlying assumption that additional SPAs are required for these species, but SPA Review states that suites adequate for three of these. Report will be useful if SPA suites for any of these species are reviewed in future.
- Presentation good at 10 km square level, and list of 'best' 10 km squares useful, but this is not especially useful for site-based considerations – counts would be needed for context.
- Expressing data in relation to the 1% threshold for a species not a requirement given provisions in SPA selection guidelines and combined densities not especially useful as focus is at species level. Another step would be required to evaluate specific areas.

5.2. The Group agreed that there were three steps to reviewing SPA provision for these species; (1) review of state of species SPA suites, (2) list of 'best' 10 km squares, and (3) identification of areas within these that may be suitable for further consideration. Steps 1 and 2 have been completed in the form of the SPA Review and BTO Report 272, but data adequacy for completion of the final step would need to be assessed. The Group agreed that this assessment is of low priority. However, it was agreed that JNCC would produce a short briefing for the January 2004 meeting synthesising steps 1 & 2, following which advice would be sought from the Natura 2000 Steering Group on whether additional SPA provision was necessary.

Action Point 7: JW to finalise comment on BTO Report 272 by end of May 2003 and send to Secretariat for circulation to the Group.

Action Point 8: JNCC to write short briefing on SPA provision for non-estuarine species, and data needs, for the January 2004 meeting of the Group.

6. Best practice guidelines for bird surveys (JNCC briefing)

- 6.1. HB introduced the part one of the first draft of *Best Practice Guidelines for Bird Surveys and Data Handling*. The guidelines are in two parts with part one covering guiding principles and part two detailing guidance on access law, how data are used for designations and species sensitivity. The first draft of part two was still being written at the time of the meeting.
- 6.2. The Group agreed that this is a complex and sensitive issue and that the guidelines must help build confidence in bird surveying by all involved, but especially surveyors and land managers.
- 6.3. The Group agreed that the guidelines should remain confidential until finalised, and so drafts of the guidelines will not be published on the JNCC website.

Action Point 9: HB to complete first draft of part two of the bird survey guidelines and circulate to Group and guidelines sub-group (part one to be circulated to sub-group also).

Action point 10: Group to comment on part one of the bird survey guidelines by end of June 2003.

7. CHIP update

- 7.1. DAS gave a brief update on progress: contract for phase one complete; JNCC now to collate species texts and produce overview of these and next steps for the project.

Action Point 11: JNCC to present an overview of phase one of the Cropped Habitats Information Project (CHIP) to the September 2003 meeting of the Group.

Species Items

8. Re-established raptors

- 8.1. IB introduced this work item, which was originally identified for medium-term consideration and 'parked' until May 2003 by the Group.
- 8.2. The Group agreed that the principal species for consideration were red kite (including Welsh population) and white-tailed eagle, but that osprey might also be regarded as a re-establishing species in England.
- 8.3. To enable discussions at a future time it was agreed that detailed information on status, with expert predictions on future, medium-term change, should be prepared for the Group. It was agreed that the agencies would produce papers on the three species for the January 2004 meeting of the Group.

Action Point 12: SNH, CCW and EN to prepare papers on the status of red kite, white-tailed eagle and osprey and present them to the January 2004 meeting of the Group.

General Items II

9. WeBS Alerts (briefing from Dr. Mark Rehfisch, BTO)

- 9.1. Dr. Mark Rehfisch, Head of the Wetlands & Coastal Ecology Unit at the BTO, gave a PowerPoint presentation on the development of the WeBS Alerts system and its use by the Environment Agency for their review of consents.
- 9.2. The WeBs Alerts system compares smoothed trends of individual species over various time periods at the national, regional and site level against thresholds: changes of 25-50% and 50% or higher trigger 'alerts' for species at the different geographical levels. Sites include SPAs.
- 9.3. Group discussion touched on the following topics:
 - 9.3.1. Data sufficiency – good for the majority of sites, but smaller sites, such as some of the smaller SSSIs, do not have sufficiently frequent coverage to be included in this type of analysis.

- 9.3.2. Choice of thresholds – 25% and 50% thresholds are arbitrary and it will be important to review alerts in light of other factors, such as behaviour.
 - 9.3.3. Confidence in an alert representing a real decline – analysis method uses consistency limits rather than confidence limits as latter are not suitable for the data in use. Analysis has been done on the frequency of ‘false’ alerts and this occurs rarely.
 - 9.3.4. Testing of alerts in terms of what is happening to habitats – presents difficulties as causative link between habitat change and population change complex, but event monitoring will be important in allowing interpretation of changes at the site level.
 - 9.3.5. Adopting ‘alerts’ approach with other species in the SPA network – should the WeBS Alerts approach be used as a model for other species in SPAs, for example seabirds? Are there adequate data to allow this? Should future surveys be designed to provide data for this purpose?
- 9.4. Dr. Rehfisch outlined the next steps for the WeBS Alerts development: a scientific paper on methods is being prepared; WeBS partners are currently being consulted on the approach; WeBS Alerts system will be launched in autumn 2003; the Environment Agency report will be completed soon and will be made available to the Secretariat to circulate to Group members.

Action Point 13: Secretariat to circulate the EA WeBS Alerts report to Group.

10. Winter Gull Roost Survey (WinGS) (briefing by Dr. Mark Rehfisch, BTO)

- 10.1. Dr. Rehfisch gave a PowerPoint presentation on the preliminary results of the 2002/03 pilot Winter Gull Roost Survey and plans for the full survey which is due to start in 2003/04.
- 10.2. The pilot was designed to test whether significant numbers of birds were arriving at roosts after dark, which is not the case, and whether there are significant numbers roosting along the coast away from known sites, which proved to be the case. The full survey will therefore need to cover the coast more fully, but will not need to take account of birds after dark.
- 10.3. The cost of a full survey, including VAT, would be about £130,000 and it is planned to spread this cost over four years beginning in 2003/04. This would provide the first definitive UK population estimates for five species (previous surveys, the last of which was in 1993, have been based on key sites and have underestimated populations) and would identify areas supporting nationally important numbers in the survey years.
- 10.4. A query over little gull arose as it will soon be added to Annex I of the Birds Directive and occurs regularly in the UK. It was agreed that this survey is not the most suitable for the species and that day-time surveys, e.g. WeBS, are likely to provide the best data for this species. It was confirmed that priority dates will be set for the survey, but that there would be some flexibility.
- 10.5. The Group thanked Dr. Rehfisch for his excellent briefings on both the WeBS Alerts system and the Winter Gull Roost Survey.

11. Bilateral discussions

- 11.1. RSPB stated that its IBA/SPA project reports for England, Wales and Northern Ireland are with local staff for verification. Some bilateral discussions had taken place in Scotland. GW tabled a summary of generic issues and how these fit within the overall RSPB IBA/SPA project – the SPA SWG has all of these generic issues within its work programme. 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.
- 11.2. EHS, Duchas, RSPB, and Bird Watch Ireland are discussing hen harrier SPAs, including cross-border sites. Data collation is taking place and will be complete in August 2003. A separate issue is that the inshore waters of Belfast Water are no longer of international importance due to changes in population thresholds and EHS wishes to discuss this within the Group in September 2003.
- 11.3. CCW is developing data exchange principles with RSPB (SW will provide these to Secretariat for consideration during development of bird survey guidelines). Analysis of seaduck data for Liverpool Bay is being led by JNCC. CCW will report on Chough in September 2003.
- 11.4. SNH is currently assessing the RSPB's new IBA/SPA project report. Three SPAs were classified in early March; Muirkirk and North Lowther Uplands, Arran Moors and Glen App & Galloway Moors. Consultation is ongoing for the extension to the Forth Islands SPA and for Imperial Dock. SNH is also developing a position on data sensitivity, which will be made available to the Secretariat for consideration during development of bird survey guidelines.
- 11.5. EN is consulting on the proposed extension to the Stour & Orwell Estuaries. The RSPB's proposals for extensions on both banks of the Thames are under consideration and a decision will be made later in 2003.

Action Point 14: EHS to prepare briefing on designation issues related to inshore waters at Belfast Water and present to the Group in September 2003.

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

- 12.1. No matters arising.
- 12.2. Action points 2003/1/1 and /6 are deferred pending decisions by the Natura 2000 Steering Group. 2003/1/9 cannot be discharge until new thresholds for mixed populations agreed (see 4 above), so will be discharged pending this. 2003/1/15 will be deferred to September 2003. 2003/1/18 is outstanding.

13. Review work programme

- 13.1. The Group reviewed the work programme for September 2003 and January 2004, and requested that the Secretariat add May and September 2004 meetings.

14. Dates and venues of next meetings

- 14.1. 23rd September 2003, at NFU, London.
- 14.2. 28th January 2004, hosted by EHS, Belfast.

Attachments:

Approved minutes of the 29th January 2003 meeting (2003/1).
Revised work programme.

UK SPA SCIENTIFIC WORKING GROUP

MEETING 2003/2, 7TH MAY 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 23rd September 2003 meeting (see minutes of last meeting also):

(Papers to be submitted to secretariat by 5th September 2003)

Action Point 1: Secretariat to produce a resume of each meeting and draft agenda for the subsequent meeting to send to Defra for circulation to the Natura 2000 Steering Group.

Action Point 2: Defra to keep SPA SWG Secretariat informed of meeting dates for the Natura 2000 Steering Group and the Natura 2000 NGO Liaison Group.

Action Point 3: Secretariat to solicit briefing on Common Standards Monitoring, including reporting obligations, from JNCC.

Action point 4: Chair to discuss role of the EU Marine Working Group with Defra and feedback to the Group in September 2003.

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Action Point 11: JNCC to present an overview of phase one of the Cropped Habitats Information Project (CHIP) to the September 2003 meeting of the Group.

Action Point 13: Secretariat to circulate the EA WeBS Alerts report to Group.

Action Point 14: EHS to prepare briefing on designation issues related to inshore waters at Belfast Water and present to the Group in September 2003.

Deferred Actions from 2003/1:

Action Point 1: Chair to request that Defra provide a briefing note to the SPA SWG outlining the Terms of Reference, membership and meetings schedule of the Natura 2000 Steering Group and the Natura 2000 NGO Liaison Group, and guidance on the process of information exchange between both of these groups and the SPA SWG. Also, to transmit all approved minutes from these fora, as available, to the SPA SWG Secretariat for circulation to the Group.

Action Point 6: Chair to discuss with Defra the appropriate timing of publication of the Annual Report on the JNCC website.

Action Point 9: JNCC to scope practical implications of new waterbird population estimates by comparison with the SPA review data and present a briefing to the Group at the May meeting, to also be circulated to the Natura 2000 Steering Group.

Action Point 15: JNCC & WWT to develop a more detailed paper on eider genetics and movements and present this to the May 2003 meeting of the Group.

Action Point 18: NFU and CLA to provide EN with lists of local officers in England.

Actions from this meeting to be discharged prior to 29th January 2004 meeting or another future meeting (see minutes of last meeting also):

Action Point 8: JNCC to write short briefing on SPA provision for non-estuarine species, and data needs, for the January 2004 meeting of the Group.

Action Point 12: SNH, CCW and EN to prepare papers on the status of red kite, white-tailed eagle and osprey and present them to the January 2004 meeting of the Group.