

## Views About Management



### **A statement of English Nature's views about the management of Steeple Point to Marsland Mouth Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).**

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

Not all of the management principles will be equally appropriate to all parts of the SSSI. Also, 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.

The management views set out below do not constitute consent for any operation. English Nature's written consent is still required before carrying out any operation likely to damage the features of special interest (see your SSSI notification papers for a list of these operations). English Nature welcomes consultation with owners, occupiers and users of the SSSI to ensure that the management of this site conserves and enhances the features of interest, and to ensure that all necessary prior consents are obtained.

## **Management Principles**

### **Supralittoral rock**

Rocky coasts are found where hard rock exposures occur at the shore which can be relatively resistant to weathering. These exposures often form sea cliffs and other steeply inclined shorelines, sometimes associated with shore platforms that shelve gradually seaward. Supralittoral rock refers to exposures that occur above the normal high tide level, but are still influenced by wave splash and exposure to sea spray. The structure and composition of the rock influences the species and plant communities that can develop. These also vary depending on exposure, steepness and aspect. Rocky coasts are important to many animal species, for example, they provide haul out areas for seals, and breeding locations for sea birds. Many invertebrate species, both marine and terrestrial, are also associated with rocky coasts.

The need for active management of rocky coasts is often minimal, with the key management principle being to allow dynamic processes to proceed freely.

### **Coastal Cliffs and Foreshore (EC and EF sites)**

Coastal geological sites form a very important part of England's geological resource for two reasons. Firstly, in many areas the only natural rock exposures are on the

coast. Secondly, coastal cliffs often provide much better exposure of geological features than comparable inland sites.

The key management principle for coastal geological sites is to maintain exposure of the geological interest by allowing natural processes to proceed freely. Inappropriate construction of coastal defences can completely conceal rock exposures and result in the effective loss of the geological interest. In addition, any development which prevents or slows natural erosion can have a damaging effect. Erosion is necessary to maintain fresh geological outcrops. Reducing the rate of erosion usually results in rock exposures becoming obscured by vegetation and rock debris.

Coastal processes are complex and no section of coastline exists in isolation. This means that coastal protection has indirect effects on other parts of the coast. Developments do not necessarily have to take place within the boundary of a site to cause damage. For example, cliff protection in one area may starve other beaches of sediment, accelerating cliff retreat elsewhere. As processes within a site can be affected by developments beyond the site boundary, it is important to take a broad and integrated approach to coastal management. This can provide significant benefits to the conservation of coastal geological sites.

Active management of coastal geological sites is often only necessary when human activity has interfered with natural rates of erosion. Clearance of vegetation or rock debris may be necessary to re-expose geological features where they have become obscured.

Collecting of geological specimens may be acceptable if undertaken in a responsible manner. However, there are some sites where the geological interest is very finite in nature and over-collecting can result in damage or destruction of the interest. Collecting of specimens requires very careful management to ensure that the geological resource is conserved.

Certain activities can cause direct damage to geological sites located on the foreshore and management should aim to avoid or, if necessary, minimise any harmful effects. Such activities include dredging, construction of pipes, heavy machinery crossing the geological features and, in some instances, the introduction of large quantities of beach feed material.

### **Maritime cliff grassland and heathland**

Maritime cliff grasslands and heathlands on slopes or cliff tops are maintained by a combination of grazing and natural factors, such as erosion and exposure to salt-spray and wind. Together these maintain the characteristic open nature of maritime grassland and heathland vegetation. Maritime grassland and heathland supports the greatest diversity of plants and animals (including a diverse invertebrate fauna and a number of characteristic bird species) where management maintains an open nature of the habitats, and by promoting a varied structure of uneven-aged stands of native heathers and other plants.

Changes in agricultural practices have led to the abandonment of grazing on many of these habitats and subsequently scrub encroachment can occur, especially where

exposure is less extreme. Where grazing is still practised, it should continue. By grazing selectively in different areas and on different plants, free-roaming livestock help to maintain variation in the vegetation composition and structure. They can also suppress scrub encroachment and provide some light poaching to create small pockets of bare ground that are of benefit to a variety of specialised plants, invertebrates and reptiles. The precise timing and intensity of grazing will vary between sites according to local conditions and requirements, such as the type or availability of stock, and the practicalities of grazing on often inaccessible areas of cliffs.

Where grazing has lapsed, reintroduction should be given careful consideration. However, where there has not been a history of grazing, on exposed sites the maritime grassland and heathland can be sustained as part of a successional cycle. Where grazing-sensitive species are present, grazing should not be introduced.

Prescribed burning can be useful for maintaining the structural diversity of the heathland, and for re-establishing areas of pioneer heath required by certain species, but special care is required when sensitive species are present. Burning must be used with caution, as inappropriate burning can be very damaging to both plant and animal communities, and careful consideration should be given to the timing of the burn.

The cliff top communities of vegetated maritime cliffs and slopes often form part of (or are adjacent to) land managed for agricultural purposes, which may be outside the SSSI boundary. Management of this land should take into account the indirect impact arising from the application of herbicides, pesticides and artificial fertilisers. Cliff-top vegetation can also be destroyed where it is squeezed between a receding cliff face and cultivated land, therefore the management of land adjacent to cliff-top habitats should seek to limit this where possible.

### **Coastal Scrub**

Scrub habitats are low-growing communities where the main woody components are bushes or small trees, such as gorse, blackthorn and hawthorn. Scrub supports a wide variety of species and ecological communities, including invertebrates and lichens. In particular, the transitional zone between scrub and other habitats can be important for wildlife.

Maintaining structural diversity and a mosaic of age classes within areas of scrub is important for maintaining the diversity of species the scrub is able to support. In steep cliff locations it may be impracticable to manage scrub due to inaccessibility; in these circumstances land slips and exposure to wind and salt-spray may create structural diversity and a mosaic of age classes without active management. Elsewhere, scrub can be managed by rotational cutting or burning and by grazing. By its nature, grazing can help to create a patchy mosaic of scrub and other habitats. As with cutting and burning, it can also help to maintain a range of age classes.

Although it is entirely appropriate to maintain areas of scrub as part of the habitat mosaic it is also necessary to control the extent of scrub to prevent it heavily invading other habitats of nature conservation importance, particularly maritime cliff grassland and heathland. In many locations it would be beneficial to reduce the amount of scrub

cover, but to still maintain a small amount of scattered scrub rather than seeking to eradicate it entirely.

### **Neutral pasture**

Neutral pasture is present in some areas away from salt spray, either set back from the cliff tops or in the valleys running inland from the coast. Neutral pasture requires active management if it is to retain its conservation interest. In order to maintain a species-rich sward, each year's growth of vegetation must be removed. Otherwise the sward becomes progressively dominated by tall and vigorous grasses which, together with an associated build up of dead plant matter, suppress less vigorous species and reduce the botanical diversity of the site. On pasture land this management is achieved by grazing. The precise timing and intensity of grazing will vary both between and within sites, according to local conditions and requirements (such as, for example, type or availability of stock or the needs of individual plants or animals of conservation concern) but should aim to keep a relatively open sward without causing excessive poaching. Light trampling can be of benefit by breaking down leaf litter and providing areas for seed germination. Any surrounding, well-managed hedges may considerably add to the habitat in providing shelter for invertebrates.

### **Broadleaved semi-natural woodland**

Broadleaved semi-natural woodland is present in some of the sheltered valleys running inland from the coast, particularly Marsland Valley. There are many different ways in which broadleaved woodland can be managed to conserve its value for wildlife. The following gives broad views on a range of regimes that may be appropriate.

A diverse woodland structure, with open space, a dense understory, and a more mature overstory is important. A range of ages and species within and between stands is desirable. Some dead and decaying wood, such as fallen logs, can provide habitats for fungi and invertebrates. However, work may be needed to make safe dangerous trees in areas of high public access. Both temporary and permanent open spaces benefit groups of invertebrates such as butterflies. They may require cutting to keep them open, and should be of sufficient size to ensure that sunny conditions prevail for most of the day.

Felling, thinning or coppicing may be used to create or maintain variations in the structure of the wood, and non-native trees and shrubs can be removed at this time. To avoid disturbance to breeding birds the work is normally best done between the beginning of August and the end of February. Work should be avoided when the ground is soft, to prevent disturbing the soil and ground flora. Normally successive felling, thinning or coppicing operations should be spread through the wood to promote diversity, but where there is open space adjacent plots should be worked to encourage the spread of species that are only weakly mobile. Natural regeneration from seed or stump regrowth is preferred to planting because it helps maintain the local patterns of species and the inherent genetic character of the site.

Deer management and protection from rabbits or livestock are often necessary. Whilst light or intermittent grazing may increase woodland diversity, heavy browsing

can damage the ground flora and prevent successful regeneration. Invasive species, such as Rhododendron or Himalayan balsam, should be controlled.

Parts of a wood should be left unmanaged to benefit species that do best under low disturbance or in response to natural processes. Within these areas some trees will eventually die naturally and dead wood accumulate.

### **All habitats**

The habitats within this site are highly sensitive to fertilisers and pesticides, applications of which should be avoided both within the site itself and in adjacent surrounding areas. Herbicides may be useful in targeting certain invasive species, but should be used with extreme care. Access to this site, and any recreational activities within, may also need to be controlled.