

Views About Management

A statement of English Nature's views about the management of Ashby Canal 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

Canals

Most canals were created during the 19th century for the inland transport of freight by boat, but their use declined with the advent of the railways and by the early 20th century many canals had fallen into disrepair. Today most of the canal network is open to navigation and mainly supports pleasure boating. However, small proportions of canals are not open to boating and are termed 'remainder waterways'. Despite their artificial origin and uniform structure, canals may have significant wildlife value as they are often fed by good quality, upland water supplies. Additionally, canals may represent the only area of freshwater habitat in many urban areas. The character of canals varies according to their setting, water source and operation. Most canals support aquatic plants and animals similar to those found in natural lakes or ponds but others may have species more typical of rivers.

Remainder canals are very similar to natural water bodies and are often subject to natural processes including the accumulation of silt and encroachment by emergent marginal plants such as reed sweet-grass. Management intervention may be necessary to prevent the accumulation of silt and to maintain aquatic plants where these are threatened by the encroachment of marginal plants that are able to colonise across the channel width. Periodic dredging of short lengths may be required to maintain open water areas.

On navigable canals, boat traffic and associated canal management are likely to be the major influences on the wildlife present and should be managed sympathetically to avoid conflict with the management of the canal for nature conservation. Low levels of boat traffic may be beneficial, preventing marginal plants from developing across the channel, but with greater levels of traffic it is increasingly likely that boats will cause excessive damage to aquatic plants as well as causing silt to remain suspended in the water column which also shades out aquatic plants. Dredging is often undertaken to maintain sufficient channel depth for boat passage and if carefully managed this can be beneficial in creating suitable habitat and rooting substrate for plant growth, providing dredging is not undertaken too frequently or over excessive lengths. The uniform structure of many canals limits the extent of shallow water habitat and opportunities to create marginal shelves or adopt soft-bank construction may also be beneficial to the conservation interest of the canal. Where native crayfish are an interest feature, exposed gaps and crevices in masonry lining the canal may form an important habitat for the species, and any maintenance of the canal should aim to maintain these living spaces.

Canals may be affected by pollution or increased levels of plant nutrients which can lead to excessive algal growths and a loss of aquatic plants. Activities which may lead to an increase in nutrients include pollution from direct discharges into the canal and also from diffuse sources resulting from land management practices in the catchment supplying the canal water. Increases in the amount of sediment entering the canal should be avoided as these can also result in high levels of nutrients and reduce the water depth of the canal, making it necessary for more frequent dredging. Other activities that can lead to a decrease in the diversity of aquatic plants in favour of algae include the control or removal of the natural aquatic vegetation of the canal and the intentional or accidental introduction of species such as bottom feeding coarse fish which uproot plants and disturb the sediments.

Management should aim to maintain water levels appropriate for the conservation interest of the canal. For example, lowering of water levels in the canal by excessive draw down within a given length of the canal could be damaging to aquatic communities, leaving a narrow strip of marginal vegetation exposed high above the water level.

Canals are vulnerable to the introduction of invasive species for example, non-native crayfish or plant species such as Australian swamp stonecrop, and management may be necessary to prevent the spread of these species should they appear on the canal. Where native crayfish are present any measures which may limit the risks of transferring non-native crayfish or crayfish plague (such as information and awareness-raising initiatives amongst visitors to the waterbody) should be encouraged.

Canal banks and margins often support a variety of other wetland habitats including reed swamp and fen, as well as more terrestrial habitats such as grassland, hedgerows and woodland, all of which add to the diversity of habitats present on the site. These may require some active management to maintain the diversity of habitats present and the fauna and flora they support, particularly for the benefit of breeding birds, mammals (especially water voles) and invertebrates.