

## Views About Management



### **A statement of English Nature's views about the management of Ribble Estuary 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**

### **Coastal saltmarsh**

Saltmarshes form the upper vegetated portions of intertidal mudflats in sheltered coastal locations, such as estuaries, lagoons and beach plains. There is typically a zonation of vegetation, from plants adapted to regular immersion by the tides (halophytes), through to more widespread plant species in the areas less frequently covered by the sea. The halophyte plant species are confined to this type of habitat, and areas of structurally diverse vegetation provide good invertebrate habitat. Saltmarshes are also important nursery sites for several fish species, and important refuge, feeding and breeding grounds for wading birds and wildfowl.

Where saltmarshes require management this has traditionally been achieved by grazing, and previously used regimes should be continued. Grazing provides a variety of different habitats, particularly for wintering bird species, and if grazing were to cease there may be a loss of botanical diversity. The precise timing and intensity will vary according to local conditions and requirements, for example the type or availability of stock, or the need to avoid trampling ground nesting birds. However on many sites, the aim will be to create a short turf that can be attractive to overwintering wildfowl, with a reduction in stock density in the early summer for the benefit of ground-nesting birds. Indeed, careful reduction of grazing can increase the

number of breeding birds, without significantly altering the plant species composition. Care should be taken not to overgraze the site, as this may reduce the diversity of animal and plant species that the saltmarsh is able to support, as well as potentially impact the sediments supporting the saltmarsh.

Not all saltmarsh habitats require active management to retain their conservation interest. Where there has not been a history of grazing, the saltmarsh will be able to maintain itself and grazing-sensitive species are likely to be present, therefore grazing should not be introduced.

There are a number of factors that are contributing to saltmarsh change that management may need to take into consideration. These include coastal erosion as a result of coastal flood-defence works, rising sea-levels, variations in sediment deposition, and land claim for development.

### **Littoral sediments (mud and sand flats)**

Intertidal mud and sand flats include a range of generally muddy or sandy low-gradient shores that are exposed to air during low tide and submerged during the higher tides. High energy shores, such as those on open coasts, are generally sandy in nature whilst more sheltered, low energy flats are muddier. They support a wide variety of marine invertebrates that represent an important food source for many fish and bird species.

Good water quality and sediment quality should be maintained, and the sediment budget within the estuarine or coastal system should not be restricted by anthropogenic influences.

The birds that use mud and sandflats for feeding and roosting are vulnerable to disturbance from human activities, for example, bait digging, dog walking and wildfowling. These activities can lead to reduced time spent feeding, or individuals being restricted to areas with a poor food supply. Disturbance should therefore be minimised, especially at times when bird populations may be stressed, such as during severe winter weather.

The location and extent of mud or sandflats is dependent on the extent to which the estuary or coast where they occur is constrained from responding to sea level rise and changing sediment regimes. Management needs to create space to enable landward roll-back to take place in response to sea-level rise, and should also allow the system to be dynamic and retain the flexibility to respond to associated changes such as the movement of physical features within the system, e.g. migrating subtidal sandbanks.

### **Floodplain and coastal grazing marsh**

Flat land around sluggish rivers and inland of salt marshes has historically been used for grazing and is referred to as grazing marsh. Although very wet in winter, these marshes are generally dry in the summer except for the water that remains in ditches. Traditional methods of management have produced a mixture of flower-rich meadows, rhynes and scrub that support a rich variety of flowering plants, invertebrates, birds and amphibians.

In order to maintain a species-rich sward, each year's growth of vegetation must be removed to prevent the sward from becoming progressively dominated by tussocky 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 grazing marshes, the above objective is commonly achieved by closing the fields to stock in the spring and taking the standing crop as hay. This is usually done in early July, but the precise timing of the cut depends on local factors, including past management and current weather conditions. It should be after ground-nesting birds have fledged their young and any short-lived, characteristic plants have set seed.

The aftermath is then grazed in late summer/autumn. Aftermath grazing is important for maintaining a species-rich sward, both through controlling competitive grasses and through hoof-prints providing suitable sites for seedlings to establish. Heavy poaching must be avoided, however. Trees and scrub are of particular importance for invertebrates and birds but should be confined to small, scattered groups. The meadow should not be re-seeded.

Regular and careful maintenance of surface drainage including ditches and drains may be necessary. Occasionally cleaning out ditches is also of benefit to the plant, invertebrate and amphibian species the ditches support and ideally, ditch management should be undertaken on a rotation to create a range of different management stages ranging from open water to denser vegetation growth. Management should allow winter flooding to occur. Deepening of surface drainage should be avoided.

Management should ensure the protection of appropriate water quality, which is usually dependent on land-use in the wider catchment. Where water is excessively rich in fertilisers such as nitrogen and phosphorus, enrichment will alter the plants found in the meadow and the ditches, usually for the worse, by encouraging tall rank grasses and nettles.

### **All habitats**

The habitats within this site are highly sensitive to inorganic 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.