

Chesil and the Fleet: Case History

This case history has been prepared as a record of the work undertaken on Chesil and the Fleet in establishing a management scheme on the site as a means of sharing the experiences and good practice that have emerged from this.

A. General description and features of conservation importance

Chesil and the Fleet European Marine Site consists of parts of a candidate Special Area of Conservation and a Special Protection Area. The candidate Special Area of Conservation has been selected on account of the following interest features:

- Lagoons
- annual vegetation of driftlines
- Mediterranean and thermo-Atlantic halophilous scrub
- Atlantic salt meadows

The Chesil and Fleet SPA has been classified on account of the following qualifying features:

- Internationally important populations of little tern *Sterna albifrons*;
- Internationally important assemblages of regularly occurring migratory species.

The Fleet lagoon is noted to be amongst the best example of its type in Europe. Additionally, *lagoons* are recognised as being the only UK marine habitat with an EC conservation 'priority' status. The Fleet is 480ha in area and is flanked by the shingle barrier beach of Chesil Bank which extends for 27 km along the Dorset coast.

The marine invertebrate communities and flora of the Fleet are exceptionally diverse with a number of nationally rare, scarce and protected species. A low freshwater input produces fully saline conditions throughout most of the Fleet. The tidal range is much smaller and temperature range much greater than on the open coast and a range of seabed types are found within the lagoon, from tide-swept bedrock to soft, deep mud.

The Fleet and Chesil Bank are fringed with extensive drift-line and saltmarsh communities. The site also supports internationally important populations of wintering and breeding birds with little tern breeding on Chesil Bank and feeding in the lagoon and elsewhere and large numbers of brent geese and wigeon roosting and feeding within the site over the winter period.

B. Socio-economic characteristics

The community around Chesil and the Fleet can be divided into the urban conurbation towards the east of the site, around Weymouth, and the rural community to the west. The vast majority of the hinterland is in agricultural use and is part of the Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The site supports small but locally important fyke net, mackerel and mullet fisheries and is the location for an oyster farm. There are two Ministry of Defence facilities adjacent to and making use of the Fleet and Chesil Beach. The adjacent Portland Harbour, once the site of a Naval Base, is now managed by a commercial port.

Whilst a large part of the site is under private ownership and has been managed largely for nature conservation for several decades, tourism is an increasing pressure on the site necessitating a Visitor Centre which provides information to visitors and users. The site is also increasingly used as an educational resource with many visiting schools and colleges carrying out a range of field work and research projects.

C The Relevant Authorities for Chesil and the Fleet European Marine Site

The following relevant authorities are represented on the European marine site Steering Group:

Dorset County Council
English Nature
Environment Agency
Portland Harbour Authority
Southern Sea Fisheries District
West Dorset District Council
Wessex Water
Weymouth & Portland Borough Council

In addition to the above, the Ministry of Defence (Wyke Regis Training Area) and Ilchester Estate have played an active part on the Steering Group due to their significant military and ownership/management roles respectively.

D. Management Structures

A Steering Group of the relevant authorities listed above was established for the site in 1997. This group includes representatives of the most significant land owner - the Ilchester Estate - and the Ministry of Defence. Dorset County Council took the chairing role and English Nature has provided the secretariat. The Steering Group met on at least a quarterly basis to oversee the initial establishment of the management scheme. Further development and implementation of the scheme will see them meeting on a six monthly basis.

An Advisory group consisting of adjacent owners and occupiers, right holders, local interests and user groups has long been in existence to support the work of the Ilchester Estate and this group has been included in the management scheme process, meeting on an annual basis. In addition to these two groups, the Fleet Study Group, consisting of professional and amateur scientists with a particular interest in the Fleet, has provided scientific advice and support to the management scheme.

E. Key Events

1995 -1997

Consultations on the proposed SAC were initiated by EN in 1995. The site was confirmed as a candidate SAC in October 1996. A relevant authorities workshop took place in 1997 after which the Steering Group was formally established. Information gathering on management and activities affecting the site began. Considerable effort was put into building awareness amongst officers of relevant authorities.

1998

Status report on little tern breeding population on Chesil Bank was produced and provided the launch pad for a new little tern recovery project. A variety of presentations describing the European marine site were given to wider interest groups. The membership and role of the Advisory Group was agreed. Work on drafting conservation objectives began. Water quality was raised as the main issue for the Fleet and thoughts turned to further work required to investigate the nutrient status of the lagoon. A bathymetric survey was conducted to assist in producing a flushing and flow rate model (work by Cardiff University). The first draft of the Estate management plan (to form the core of the marine scheme of management) was produced for consultation.

1999

A leaflet aimed at raising awareness amongst the general public was produced in association with the Heritage Coast Services. It includes a pull-out poster describing the European marine site. The little tern recovery project was launched this year with a considerable amount of publicity and included the celebrity David Bellamy to get the message across to the media.

The stakeholder review conducted for the site during this year (Task 1.1) highlighted the role of the farming community in maintaining favourable condition for the Fleet, with a particular focus on water quality. A review of all existing water quality information was conducted, including a review of the Fleet Study Group archive. The contract to trial remote sensing techniques for monitoring aquatic vegetation was let in summer 1999.

The formal consultation draft of the conservation objectives and English Nature's advice on operations likely to damage or disturb the interest features of the site – the 'Regulation 33 package' - was produced in July of this year. Over 150 organisations and individuals were consulted. 42 written responses were received, most broadly supportive, and one formal objection from Portland Harbour Authority was registered. Various amendments were made to the package as a result of the consultation responses. All respondents were sent letters replying to their comments. The outstanding strategic issues identified through the consultation were considered at a meeting of EN Council in October. Following this, the package was amended and formally issued in November 1999.

2000

Proposals were developed for a collaborative project involving the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group and the Environment Agency to increase awareness of farmers in the site and modify farming practices around the periphery of the site. Before this work was initiated however, it was felt that preliminary investigation into the willingness of the farming community to get involved was needed. This culminated in a contract report confirming that there is interest and commitment in starting a new initiative amongst the farming community.

After discussing management measures for the site amongst relevant authorities and the Estate, a draft management scheme was circulated for wider consultation amongst members of the Steering and Advisory Groups. This draft scheme drew heavily from the management plan prepared for the private Estate. Relevant authorities agreed on the format of the document and a design layout was produced.

The year 2000 marked the 25th anniversary of the Fleet Study Group which was celebrated in November by a scientific symposium which promoted the ecological importance of Chesil Bank and the Fleet.

2001

A final version of the management scheme was published in March 2001.

F. Budget and Resources

The costs associated with developing the management scheme are as follows:

Category		£k
Information collation	Collation of information on management and activities, little tern report and review of water quality data	6k
Project Officer - salary and T&S	300 days (in house EN staff)	
Publicity and interpretation	Public leaflet	1
Publication of management scheme		6
Stakeholders review		6
IT equipment	Purchase of equipment plus inputting species information	4
Total		23

In addition to the above costs, relevant authorities have each contributed to the development of the scheme in officer time and small cash contributions. Over the period April 1997 - March 2001, the time input of the Project Officer is estimated in total to be 300 days with time input by relevant authorities estimated at approximately 20 person days per relevant authority.

G. List of key documents

The following reports represent the outputs of much of the work carried out on the European marine site:-

- Colombe SV. 1997. Chesil and the Fleet marine Special Area for Conservation: the current and historical status of little terns and their future management.
- English Nature. November 1999. *Chesil and the Fleet European marine site: English Nature's advice given under Regulation 33(2) of the Conservation (Natural Habitats &c.) Regulations 1994*
- English Nature. March 2001. *Chesil and the Fleet European marine site: management scheme.*
- Johnston CM, Gilliland PM. 2000. *Investigating and management of water quality in saline lagoons based on a case study of nutrients in the Chesil and Fleet European marine site.* Peterborough.
- Kennedy K. 2001. *Chesil, the Fleet and the River Wey Farming integration study.* Report to English Nature, Dorset
- Moxom D, Colombe SV. 1999. *Chesil Bank and the Fleet Management Plan, 1999-2004.* Ilchester Estates
- Pooley M, Bamber R. 2000. *Evaluation of aerial and diving techniques to survey vegetation in the Chesil and Fleet European marine site.* Report for English Nature.

In addition to the above reports, the following information may also be of use:

- Bathymetric survey (1998)
- Local newsletters featuring updates on European marine site
- Chesil and the Fleet leaflet

H REVIEW OF LEARNING

1. Information to support management schemes

The documented history and intensity of ecological study of the Fleet are the greatest of any lagoon in the UK. Information on the distribution and quality of biological features at Chesil and the Fleet was therefore available in some form or other. The most significant gap in information relates to water quality and the LIFE project has helped focus on this, with a view to improving on understanding of this vital issue in the future.

Role of Science. The Fleet Study Group has provided a valuable source of scientific archive material and opinion throughout the process. It is hoped that this group will be able to play a more active role in monitoring features within the site. The scientific symposium held in November 2000 was successful in promoting the value of scientific research in the Fleet – the proceedings will be published as a special edition of an international aquatic journal.

Role of objectives and operations advice. Considerable effort had already been put into highlighting information on operations through the Estate management plan. This document provided the framework within which operations in the management scheme were identified. The advantage of this approach was that the significance of each operation had already been discussed and agreed with managers of the site.

2. Relevant authority and stakeholder structures

Adapting existing management structures proved beneficial in avoiding duplication of effort, especially as the site had a long history of management and stewardship before the European marine site was designated. There was however the opportunity to bring in those authorities which have a responsibility for the site but until recently have remained on the fringes of any direct involvement.

3. Methods of relevant authority and stakeholder participation

Initial consultation. The initial consultation over the designation of the European marine site took place amongst a much larger consultation exercise involving many proposed SACs in the county. In general, considerable support was expressed for the designation, especially amongst the voluntary sector. There were objections and queries raised over the inclusion of some small areas in the site, but these essentially involved land outside the European marine site and were addressed as appropriate. One outstanding objection remains however, over the inclusion of land above the high water mark in a part of the site. This objection has been maintained by a key relevant authority and has hindered their inclusion in the management scheme process.

Meetings. Meetings took place as face-to-face contact rather than through workshops since relatively small numbers of people were involved. The Advisory Group met and continues to meet on an annual basis. The Steering Group met every two months or so during the intense period associated with consulting on and issuing the Regulation 33 advice and the management scheme document. Since publication of the management scheme, the Steering Group will meet at a reduced rate, probably twice a year, in order to maintain momentum with implementation of the scheme.

Relevant authority partnership-building approaches. At an early stage in the process, relevant authorities were asked to identify the advantages and disadvantages of a European marine site in their area. This was an attempt to ‘flush out’ any resentments which were possibly building amongst some, if not all, of the authorities. This was partially successful, and it was even concluded that that the European marine site brought with it more advantages (especially the high esteem and potential for attracting new funding) than disadvantages (predominantly a fear of the unknown implications of the designation and increased bureaucracy).

Stakeholder participation-building approaches. One factor felt to be particularly important in building stakeholder involvement was the concerted effort made by the Project Officer to avoid using bureaucratic language and jargon both at meetings and in the written management scheme document. This was bolstered by ensuring that early, rough drafts of the Regulation 33 advice and the management scheme document were presented to both the Steering and Advisory Groups. This allowed a more iterative process in developing these documents than might otherwise have occurred, although the brunt of the work continued to fall to the Project Officer.

As mentioned above, a group of stakeholders – the farming community – was identified as having little involvement in the European marine site but was potentially very important in influencing the condition of the site. A feasibility study of involving this community was conducted over the winter of 2000. This involved one-to-one meetings with individual farmers and workshops and was successful in identifying the constraints, issues and opportunities for integrating the management of the catchment of the site with the European marine site management scheme. Work is underway to build on this and establish a partnership project involving the farming community, the voluntary sector and regulatory bodies to deliver sustainable management in the Fleet hinterland.

Role of project officer. The Project Officer was already known to the stakeholders as a Conservation Officer in the local English Nature Team. This was helpful in developing stronger relationships with the relevant authorities especially. The Project Officer adopted a leading role in the development of the management scheme in close liaison with Estate staff and the chair of the Steering Group in particular.

4. Process and content of the management scheme document

Stakeholder and relevant authority input was achieved at the early stage of developing the management scheme document through Steering and Advisory Group meetings from 1998 onwards. Early forms of different stages of the document were presented at these meetings for discussion and modification by the Project Officer. It was agreed at an early stage by the Steering Group that, because the site was already recognised as being of international importance, and because there are many published accounts describing that importance, the management scheme need only refer to those reports or documents and could avoid repeating other work. In this way, the management scheme document could be kept short and focused on the issues and actions requiring attention. It was felt to be vital that the management scheme document should not become yet another report gathering dust on shelves, but should be user friendly, be easily updated, and should provide practical guidance to managers and users of the site.

As described above, the drafting of management measures in general came from the project officer but this drew heavily from the Estate management plan issued in 1999. Issues which were believed to be priorities for action were highlighted in bold, lead relevant authorities and other key partners were assigned to each action and some form of target and timescale given.

Practical guidance also appears in the management scheme document in the form of an insert outlining the best practice which applicants of plans and projects and relevant authorities considering them for consent or licensing should follow. Additionally, another insert included in the document is aimed specifically at visitors to the European marine site and sets out a series of questions and answers of the 'do's and don'ts' when visiting the site.

5. Interpretation and publicity

The site has long been recognised by both scientists and the local community as unique and important. Initiatives to promote interest in marine life have been taking place over the last decade or more, but the designation of the European marine site has helped to focus attention and provide increased funding and emphasis for events and projects.

Early on in the management scheme process it was agreed amongst the Steering and Advisory Groups that additional promotion of the site was not a priority given that existing wardening and interpretation services were being stretched to their limits by the number of visitors to the site and enquiries from around the country. The leaflet which was produced was aimed specifically at the holiday makers who were coming to stay at adjacent camp sites and caravan parks anyway, to help raise their awareness and understanding of the importance of the site. Presentations in the form of slide shows and talks have been given to local interest groups as a means of keeping them informed of progress in the management scheme process, rather than as a way of promoting the site itself.

A glass bottomed boat continues to operate in the eastern part of the Fleet and remains a valuable promotional tool. A video microscope was purchased for the Visitor Centre in summer 2001 and has proved to particularly valuable in showing some of the small invertebrates and plants which are specialities of the Fleet. The Visitor Centre produces a six monthly newsletter which features regular updates on the European marine site. Reserve staff continue to be involved in Marine Week and World Ocean's Day events which in turn attract local media attention. A local school was also involved in producing model tern decoys as part of the little tern restoration project.