

Ramsar Advisory Missions: Report No. 10, Northern Ireland, UK (1989)

Special attention is given to assisting member States in the management and conservation of listed sites whose ecological character is threatened. This is carried out through the Ramsar Advisory Mission, a technical assistance mechanism formally adopted by Recommendation 4.7 of the 1990 Conference of the Parties. (The Ramsar Advisory Mission mechanism was formerly known as the Monitoring Procedure and the Management Guidance Procedure.) The main objective of this mechanism is to provide assistance to developed and developing countries alike in solving the problems or threats that make inclusion in the Montreux Record necessary.

Ramsar Convention Monitoring Procedure

Report No. 10: Lough Neagh / Lough Beg,
Northern Ireland, UK

General Introduction

1. Each Contracting Party to the Ramsar Convention ("Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat" Ramsar, 1971) "shall designate suitable wetlands within its territory for inclusion in a List of Wetlands of International Importance" (Article 2.1 of the Convention). The Contracting Parties "shall designate at least one wetland to be included in the List" (Article 2.4) and "shall formulate and implement their planning so as to promote the conservation of the wetlands included in the List"(Article 3.3). Furthermore, each Contracting Party "shall arrange to be informed at the earliest possible time-if the ecological character of any wetland in its territory and included in the list has changed, is changing or is likely to change as the result of technological developments, pollution or other human interference. Information on such changes shall be passed without delay to the organization or government responsible for continuing bureau duties" (Article 3.2).

2. These are the principal stipulations of the Convention concerning wetlands included in the Ramsar List. Successive meetings of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (held in 1980 at Cagliari, Italy, in 1984 at Groningen, Netherlands and in 1987 at Regina, Canada) have devoted special attention to the conservation of listed wetlands and to the best ways of avoiding "change in ecological character".

3. Conference Document C.3.6 of the Regina meeting ("Review of national reports submitted by Contracting Parties and Review of implementation of the Convention since the second meeting in Groningen, Netherlands in May 1984") included a section (paragraphs 66 to 107) entitled "Changes in the ecological character of listed wetlands". This section recalls that it is "essential that, after a wetland has been designated for the List, its conservation status should be maintained", and that "the concept of preventing 'change in the ecological character' is fundamental to the Ramsar Convention". Paragraphs 74 to 107 then review the various wetlands on the List where such changes have occurred, are occurring, or are likely to occur.

4. During the discussion of these paragraphs, several delegates emphasized the importance of avoiding changes of this kind in listed wetlands and the Conference approved a

Recommendation (C.3.9) on this matter. The Recommendation (text attached to the present document) urges Contracting Parties to take swift and effective action to prevent any further degradation of sites and to restore, as far as possible the value of degraded sites; the Recommendation requests Contracting Parties in whose territory are located the sites identified in Conference Document C.3.6 as having incurred or being threatened by damage, to report to the Convention Bureau the actions undertaken to safeguard these sites.

5. At the fourth Meeting of the Ramsar Convention Standing Committee, the members (Pakistan, Canada, Chile, Netherlands, Poland, Switzerland, Tunisia and USA) and observers (United Kingdom, IUCN, IWRB and WWF) considered the best way of promoting the implementation of Recommendation C.3.9. A "Monitoring Procedure" (the text of which is attached to the present document) was adopted by the Standing Committee as a procedure to monitor Ramsar sites, and has been used since February 1988 by the Convention Bureau.

Lough Neagh/Lough Beg - general

6. The United Kingdom deposited its instruments of ratification of the Ramsar Convention with the Director General of Unesco on 5 January 1976. At this time it designated 13 sites with a total area of some 64,000 hectares for the "List of wetlands of international importance", among them the unified site of Lough Neagh and Lough Beg, which covers an area of 39,500 hectares. Since then, the United- Kingdom has designated another 27 sites for the List, bringing the total area designated by UK to some 166,000 hectares. Lough Neagh/Lough Beg is second only in size to the Wash (63,124 hectares) among UK Ramsar sites. Between them, the Wash and Lough Neagh/Lough Beg account for two-thirds of the total wetland area designated by UK.

7. Lough Neagh is the largest freshwater lake in the United Kingdom, indeed in the British Isles. It has a large catchment area, which covers about 40% of the surface area of Northern Ireland and stretches back into the Irish Republic. It is generally rather shallow, with an average depth of about 9 metres. It is fed by a number of major rivers (notably the Bann and the Blackwater); the Bann flows into Lough Neagh in the south and out at the northern end through Lough Beg, a smaller and shallower area of floodplain and marshes, to the sea. There is no incursion of seawater. In the last hundred years, four drainage schemes have affected the lake by reducing its level to prevent flooding of farmland. "The lake itself was dramatically changed, as its size has been considerably reduced and a distinctive break in slope has been left which marks the old shoreline. The land exposed along the lake shore is not dry enough for arable farming and is mainly used for grazing" (Craigavon Borough Council booklet, "Lough Neagh - a closer look").

8. The principal motivation for listing Lough Neagh under the Ramsar Convention was the very large number of wintering waterfowl, notably Whooper Swans of Icelandic origin and diving ducks (especially Tufted Ducks, Pochard and Goldeneye) both from Iceland and USSR. Over the five winters 1983/84 to 1987/88, Lough Neagh/Beg held the highest average peak total of all wetlands censused in UK with nearly 60,000 birds (the Wash came second!). In summer much smaller numbers of waterfowl breed. Both winter and summer waterfowl depend largely (like the eels and fish populations) on the very rich midge (Chironomid) populations.

9. The area designated for the Convention in 1976 was identical with the Area of Scientific Interest (ASI) notified under Section 15 of the Amenity Lands Act (1965). This act was basically

a planning measure which defined ASIs as areas of high scientific interest where nature conservation aims could be achieved by planning control; boundaries were drawn more widely than was strictly necessary for protection of scientific interest per se; thus in the case of Loughs Neagh/Beg, the boundaries were drawn to clearly identify road lines or field boundaries and include tracts of land which could not strictly have been classified as ASI using nature conservation criteria. Under the ASI system, agricultural change could not be controlled (Information from J Furphy, Department of the Environment, Northern Ireland).

10. Regina document C.3.6 (paragraph 104) noted that "The UK report does not mention possible changes of ecological character at Lough Neagh IWRB has received reports of a variety of possible changes here, the most serious of which is a proposal to develop lignite mining". The reason for this omission was that environmental issues in Northern Ireland are the responsibility of the Department of the Environment (Northern Ireland) and details of the situation there were not available in time for the first version of the UK report to the Regina Conference. A supplementary report on Lough Neagh and Lough Beg was later submitted and is being published in the full Proceedings of the Regina Conference. This supplementary report indicates that, while licenses have been issued for extraction of lignite, the conservation interest of the site will not be significantly affected, thanks to careful site selection and soil disposal arrangements. The supplementary report also gives details of a serious spill of wood preservative into Lough Neagh in January 1987; thanks to prompt action the incident was contained and a joint monitoring programme by the Departments of the Environment and Agriculture for Northern Ireland has so far detected no fish kill and no long term effects. The supplementary report noted that the Department of the Environment considered the Protection of the site as an important part of its conservation programme and would have its obligations under the Convention in mind before decisions were reached.

11. At meetings of the UK Working Party on the Ramsar Convention held since the Regina Conference, a further issue related to Lough Neagh has arisen. The Amenity Lands Act (1965) has been superseded by the Nature Conservation Act and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order of 1985. This order (like the Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981 in Great Britain) establishes a requirement to renotify Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs); since the notification of ASSIs entails stricter controls than the old ASIs - in particular it enables agricultural change to be controlled - boundaries are being drawn much more strictly. The possibility of a reduction in area of the Ramsar site, especially at its southern end, where the ASI boundary followed the M1 motorway, was envisaged. (An analogous problem exists at the Abberton Reservoir Ramsar site in England).

12. Following contacts at the UK Ramsar Working Party meetings and an exchange of correspondence, it was agreed that the Conservation Coordinator should visit Northern Ireland in January 1989 to operate the Monitoring Procedure, and to consult with the Department of the Environment (Northern Ireland) on:

future boundaries of the Lough Neagh/Lough Beg Ramsar site;

the lignite and wood preservative questions;

management of the Lough Neagh/Beg Ramsar site;

general application of the Convention in Northern Ireland

Current situation

13. Programme

I visited Northern Ireland from 16 to 18 January 1989, and had the opportunity to meet the principal government officials concerned at the Department of the Environment, as well as representatives of the main non-government bodies (National Trust, RSPB, ALNUS - the Association of Lough Neagh Users) and research institutions (University of Ulster Freshwater Laboratory). I spent one and a half days visiting Lough Neagh and Lough Beg, including a one and a half hour flight over the area in a light aeroplane, kindly arranged by the Department of the Environment. I also spent a morning visiting Strangford Lough, and briefly contacted personnel of the Queens University Marine Biology station.

14. Lignite extraction

There are two principal lignite deposits which have been under consideration for exploitation in local power stations. One is partly under Lough Neagh, the other under a nearby city. There was general agreement among everyone I met that, for the moment, lignite extraction is most unlikely to be pursued. It seems that a decision has been taken to develop the use of coal and oil in existing power stations.

15. On the other hand it is probable that in the long run (perhaps fifteen or twenty years ahead), the question of lignite extraction will arise again. It would therefore be extremely wise to use the breathing space thus offered to establish a stronger mechanism for conservation and wise use of the Lough. The Users' committee's suggested (see paragraph 25 below) would appear to be an ideal mechanism for this purpose.

16. Pollution incident

The spillage of wood preservative appears to have been an isolated incident, on which rapid and effective action was taken. Monitoring of the effects has been carried out by the Departments of Environment and Agriculture (Northern Ireland) and no long term effects have been noted. It is important that monitoring should continue, to confirm these preliminary results, and in this respect the University of Ulster's Freshwater Laboratory, on the very shores of Lough Neagh at Traad Point, could provide a valuable additional contribution.

17. Boundaries of the Ramsar site

This was the issue (together with wise use of the site - see paragraph 22 to 26 below) to which most time was devoted during my visit. The text of the Ramsar Convention does provide that boundaries of Ramsar sites may be altered, and even that sites may - in the urgent national interest -- be deleted. If boundaries are restricted or sites deleted, however, other equivalent areas of similar habitat have to be listed in compensation. So far Contracting Parties have attached very great importance to maintaining the integrity of their Ramsar sites: no site has ever been deleted, and in the very few cases of boundary alterations (in Belgium, Federal Republic of Germany, Iran, Italy and Norway), other adjoining areas, sometimes very considerably larger,

have been designated in compensation. (Thus for example when 27 hectares were removed from the Belgian site of Galgenschoor, 2000 hectares in the Kzer meadows were listed as a replacement). The UK has not restricted the boundaries of any of its Ramsar sites. As a matter of principle, therefore, it is highly desirable to avoid reduction of the Lough Neagh/Lough Beg Ramsar site in the process of renotifying the ASSI. A considerable portion of the Ramsar site (several thousand hectares) is involved; it would be undesirable to establish a precedent for major amendments to boundaries of Ramsar sites.

18. On the other hand, it was cogently put to me on several occasions that the southern part of the Ramsar site is largely farmland, where in addition there is considerable activity in building houses, especially second residences. Much - though not all - of the area is of limited nature conservation value, and does not meet the criteria for ASSI designation. Even if the Ramsar site were to be maintained in its integrity, the Department of the Environment would find it difficult, if not impossible, to prevent changes in agricultural use and to control house building in this part of it. In these circumstances would it not be more realistic to de-classify part of the site, list others in compensation, and provide stronger and more effective conservation measures in the remaining areas?

19. While admitting the force of the arguments set out in paragraph 18, I would prefer, partly as a matter of principle and partly in recognition of the landscape values of the area, to maintain the integrity of the original boundaries. I feel that such a large reduction in boundaries is in principle undesirable. Furthermore, there are areas of undoubted conservation value which must be retained as satellite sites, even if the boundary is reduced (Portmore Lough, the Montaigns, Lough Guellan, the shoreline below the 1959 lowering, the Peatlands Country Park, and if possible some of the fields traditionally used by wintering swans, even if these are at present largely arable). Furthermore, as a newcomer to Northern Ireland, I was most agreeably struck by the attractiveness of the landscape, with its characteristic unaltered rushy fields and cutover bogs (bogs where peat extraction has taken place and willow and alder scrub has colonized the area). There is a danger that this landscape could be gradually whittled away, unless some general landscape protection is provided. I suggest therefore that the Ramsar site be maintained in its integrity, with a strict core area and satellites benefiting from ASSI status, and elsewhere, a less constraining degree of protection (a landscape protection measure or simply maintenance of the old ASI).

20. Precedents do in fact exist in western Europe for the approach suggested in paragraph 19. This is in principle the approach to be adopted at Abberton, England, though the details have not yet been decided. Denmark has taken a very broad approach, listing 27 mainland sites (in addition to 11 in Greenland of importance for the Greenland White-fronted Goose), many of which cover a very large area, parts of which as yet have no strict habitat protection measures at national level. A particularly strong parallel exists with the Lower Rhine Ramsar site in the Federal Republic of Germany, an area of 30,000 hectares on either side of the Rhine near the Netherlands border, of international importance for wintering geese. The Federal German authorities listed the whole area as a major unit, even though much of it is under agricultural usage - both arable and dairy farming. Only small sectors have strict nature reserve status, and there have been difficulties in limiting agricultural change. Even so, designation of this large unit

provides a valuable structure for overall area planning, which would be impossible with piecemeal designation of smaller sites.

21. If on the other hand a decision is taken to reduce the area of the Ramsar site, a number of safeguards need to be built into this process. Firstly, the satellite areas of conservation interest listed in paragraph 19 should be retained within the Ramsar site. (One of them, the Montaighs, does not in fact figure in the old ASI, nor therefore in the Ramsar site). Secondly other equivalent areas in Northern Ireland should be listed in compensation. Thirdly the change of boundaries should be clearly explained, so that it does not provide a precedent for deletion of sites of major conservation interest elsewhere. In this respect a parallel situation exists with Pakistan. Pakistan became a Contracting Party in 1977, before criteria for identification of wetlands of international importance were adopted at the 1980 Ramsar conference in Cagliari. The Pakistan delegation at the Regina conference in 1987 pointed out that some of the sites listed in 1977 appeared not to meet the criteria and suggested that they be replaced by other more appropriate wetlands. The Pakistan authorities have requested the Bureau's advice on this matter in the framework of the Monitoring Procedure. It might perhaps be argued that parts of Lough Neagh, designated in 1976 before adoption of the criteria, are in the same situation as some Pakistan sites.

Wise use of the Ramsar site

22. The two principal undertakings accepted by Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention are: to designate at least one wetland for the List; and to make wise use of wetlands, whether or not they are included on the List. Until recently, the concept of wise use had received relatively little attention; at the Regina conference in 1987 it was given greater emphasis, and the Working Group on Criteria and Wise Use established at Regina has emphasized that wise use applies both to listed and unlisted wetlands.

23. As noted above, the principal motivation for listing Loughs Neagh and Beg under the Convention was the importance of its waterfowl populations and its nature conservation interest. It is most gratifying to note that the Department of the Environment is working very actively in this field by purchasing key areas round the shores of the two lakes and by making imaginative management agreements with private owners. Its wardening staff play a crucial role in observing developments, liaising with local people and arbitrating between different interests. The Oxford Island Visitor Centre, which is run by the Craigavon District Council, is a vital support for these activities.

24. Loughs Neagh and Beg do however fulfil a number of other crucially important wetland functions and values, which should be taken into account in a proper consideration of wise use. The lake is the major water supply area for the city of Belfast; it supports an important eel fishery, providing employment for some 400 fishermen; there are extensive agricultural interests; as UK's largest freshwater lake it is of intrinsic interest both from a scientific point of view (not only waterfowl but invertebrates, fish, botany and zoology - otters), but from a recreational and tourist point of view. Being so close to the major city of Belfast and in a largely unspoilt landscape, it has great tourist potential, and the recreational interests include an important wildfowling element.

25. A non-governmental 'Association of Lough Neagh Users' (ALNUS) already exists, and I was delighted to be able to address one of their meetings. I feel it would be important to develop this integrated approach to wise use of the Ramsar site. The various government bodies, land owners and users interested in the area should get together in a more formal structure to deliberate on usage of the area, to develop an overall management plan, and to put this plan into action. The Ramsar designation would provide a convenient umbrella for such a grouping. During my short visit I had no time to draw up a comprehensive list of potential participants, but the net should clearly be cast as widely as possible. Indeed, the establishment of such a users' group (which would be a most valuable innovation in a Ramsar site anywhere in the world) would be a strong reason for maintaining the integrity of the Ramsar site - and indeed for enlarging it. In such a large catchment, many influences can come from outside the Ramsar site proper (cf. the wood preservative spillage), and it would be desirable to control such influences. "The bigger the better" is the watchword of the Criteria and Wise Use Working Group.

26. The precise modalities of operating this Users' Group would of course be developed within Northern Ireland. I understand that local administrative practice favours a two-tier system, one level incorporating government bodies and land owners, the other non-government organizations. ALNUS could in any case play a very active and positive role.

Other Ramsar issues

27. In answer to parliamentary questions, the UK Minister of the Environment has on several occasions indicated which wetlands in Northern Ireland meet the Ramsar waterfowl criteria, these (in addition to Lough Neagh/Beg) are: Strangford Lough, Lough Foyle, Lough Erne and the River Grange area. It is furthermore certain that other Ulster sites - notably a series of peat bogs - would meet other Ramsar criteria (based on value for plants and animals, on uniqueness or representativeness). In discussions with officials of the Department of the Environment (Northern Ireland), I was given to understand that the Department gave high priority to designation of these sites for the Ramsar List; and that the procedure of designation could begin as soon as ASSI renotification is completed. Given the wealth and variety of Northern Ireland's wetlands, I would recommend strongly that these sites be designated as soon as possible.

28. As noted above, I had the opportunity to make a brief visit to Strangford Lough, and am convinced that it is a prime candidate for Ramsar listing: a relatively shallow marine lake of this size must be almost unique in the United Kingdom, quite apart from its value from the marine biology and ornithological points of view. I was told that ASSI renotification has already been completed for northern and southern sections of the Lough and that these measures will soon be completed for the central sector. I hope that the eventual Ramsar site would include the whole area of the lough, including the deeper marine, parts not covered by ASSI notification. I understand that, as at Lough Neagh/Beg, there are a large number of different users of Strangford Lough, and that the issue of wise use is of particular relevance. It would be appropriate to investigate the possibility of establishing a Strangford Lough consultation group (or groups) along the lines of the proposals on a Lough Neagh committee mentioned in paragraph 26 above.

29. In view of the considerable interest in Ramsar in Northern Ireland, and of the many wetland activities under way, it would be appropriate to relate these activities to the next Conference of the Ramsar Contracting Parties, to be held at Montreux, Switzerland from 27 June to 4 July 1990. Further Ulster wetlands could perhaps be designated for the List, and, if the users' committees are established, a presentation on their operations would be very welcome at the Workshop on Wise Use. In any case, it is to be hoped that the UK delegation will include a representative of Northern Ireland.

Summary of Recommendations

(a) While the likelihood of lignite extraction in the Lough Neagh area appears to have receded for the moment, it will no doubt arise again at some future date. The situation should be carefully watched and the "period of grace" should be used to strengthen conservation and wise use operations at Lough Neagh.

(b) While the effects of the wood preservative spillage appear to have been held in check, monitoring of the situation should continue.

(c) The area of the Lough Neagh/Beg Ramsar site should not be reduced; the core area of high conservation value and some satellite zones should have ASSI status, the surrounding areas could be covered by a less strict status (ASI or some form of landscape or planning control).

(d) If it is decided to reduce the area of the Lough Neagh/Beg Ramsar site, the appropriate satellite areas should be given ASSI and Ramsar status, other additional areas should be listed in compensation, and the justification for the reduction should be explained in detail.

(e) Consideration should be given to establishing a Lough Neagh users' committee, perhaps with two tiers, to coordinate management of the lake in the spirit of Ramsar's "wise use" provision. A similar committee could be established at Strangford Lough.

(f) Further Northern Ireland wetlands should be designated for the Ramsar List.

(g) There should be a proper reflection of the importance of Northern Ireland's wetlands at the Montreux Conference.

M Smart

23 January 1989