

Ramsar and World Heritage Conventions: Converging towards success

Case study



School children hiking through the bay of Mont-Saint-Michel abbey, France (Credit: Hemis / Alamy Stock Photo)

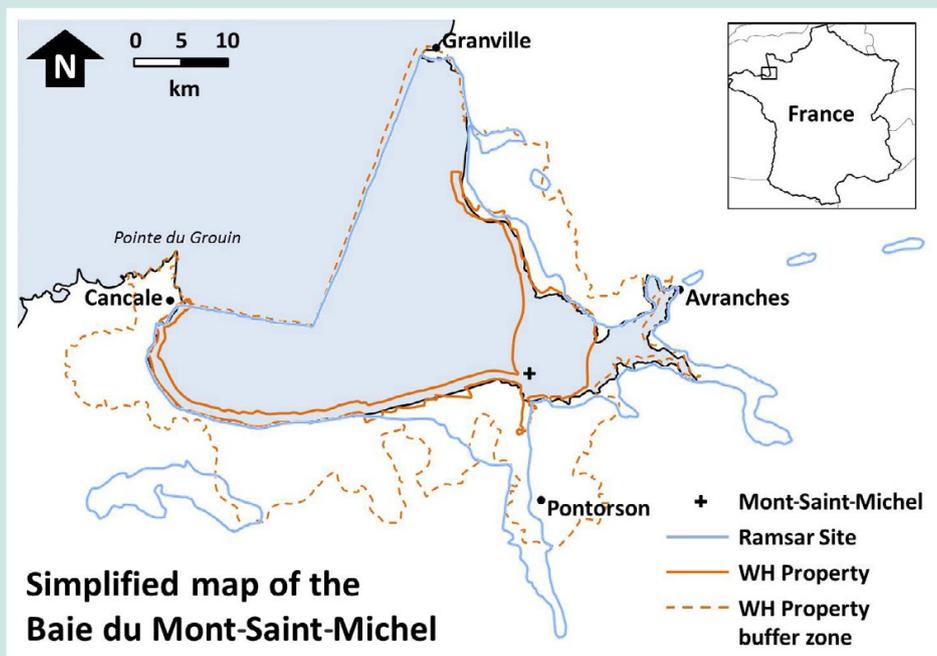
Baie du Mont-Saint-Michel, France

Summary

The Baie du Mont-Saint-Michel has an exceptional tidal range exceeding 13 metres which exposes a vast expanse of diverse habitats including salt marshes, sand and gravel flats, bivalve reefs of *Sabellaria alveolata* and rocky islets. These habitats support up to 100,000 wintering wading birds as well as many other rare and protected species. The area is also of significant cultural importance due to the presence of the “Wonder of the West” on the imposing rocky islet, an 11th-to-16th century Gothic-style Benedictine abbey, dedicated to the archangel Saint Michael, and its accompanying labyrinthine village.

The Ramsar Site covers 62,000 ha and extends into the Baie du Mont-Saint-Michel from Cancale in the west to Pointe du Roc at Granville in the east, and inland along river valleys of the Le Couesnon and La Sélune. The Ramsar Site also includes a series of non-contiguous areas to the south west and the east. The World Heritage property covers a smaller area of 6,560 ha focused around the rocky islet and is surrounded by a buffer zone extending over some 57,510 ha which closely matches the Ramsar Site boundary in the bay but covers a broader terrestrial area.

Despite the World Heritage designation being based on cultural criteria alone, the importance of maintaining the maritime character and protecting the surrounding environment forms an essential component of the continued delivery of the Outstanding Universal Value of the area. The Ramsar Site designation, in combination with other national and European provisions, is considered an essential element for maintaining the overall character of the bay and perpetuating the interdependencies between humans and the natural environment.



Site Description

The Baie du Mont-Saint-Michel is located between Brittany and Normandy on the northern French coast. The bay is characterized by the second highest tidal range in Europe which reaches 16m on the highest tides and averages between 10-11m. The intertidal zone covers an area in excess of 240km² comprising a mosaic of mudflats, sandbanks, gravel beds, *Sabellaria* reefs and salt marshes. The surrounding habitats include dune systems, cliffs and a distinct rocky islet. The abbey of the Mont-Saint-Michel, built between the 11th and 16th centuries, is perched atop a rocky promontory in the south east corner of the bay.

The area is considered to be one of the best examples of Quaternary sedimentation in the world, includes the largest area of salt marsh in France and supports in excess of 100,000 wintering waders along with numerous other species of conservation importance. The site was designated as a Wetland of International Importance on 14th October 1994 and inscribed as a World Heritage property in October 1979 at the third session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee.

World Heritage and Ramsar designations

The inscription of Mont-Saint-Michel and its Bay on the World Heritage List as a 'cultural site' was on the basis of fulfilling three criteria. Under Criterion i, the area can be considered a masterpiece of human creative genius representing a unique aesthetic achievement as a result of the exceptional combination of the natural site and the human architecture. Mont-Saint-Michel also presents an unrivaled combination of the abbey with its fortified village occupying a narrow space upon the rocky islet, which not only provides an unforgettable silhouette but is also an exceptional example of medieval civilization (Criterion iii) and one of the most significant places for medieval Christianity (Criterion vi).

Baie du Mont-Saint-Michel qualified for inclusion on the List of Wetlands of International Importance on several criteria. The tidal range and the diversity of habitats can be considered exceptional, making it a unique example of a coastal wetland type in the Normandy and Brittany regions (Criterion 1). The marine environment supports a permanent population of bottlenose dolphin (Criterion 4) whilst the expanse of sand flats and salt marshes, which are the largest in France (Criterion 3), regularly support more than 100,000 wintering waterbirds including important numbers of dunlin, curlew, oystercatcher, grey plover, knot, wigeon, brent geese and godwits (Criterion 5).

The description of the ecological character of the Ramsar Site includes specific reference to the Bay's unique social and cultural values. The Ramsar Information Sheet for the Site explicitly highlights the interdependency between

the natural landscape and the architectural heritage of the Abbey, the biological interest of the bay, the geological sedimentation evolution and the economic values associated with current land uses including shellfish farming, tourism and agriculture.

The role of cultural values, practices and traditions in wetland conservation

An outline management plan produced by the Conservatoire du Littoral, a public administrative body established by the French Government under the *Ministère de la transition écologique*, emphasises the essential interactions between the sea, the coast, the rivers and the human activities which give the bay its unique character. However, it is acknowledged that increasing pressures, including from tourism and off-shore wind farm development, need to be reconciled with the bay's Outstanding Universal Value. The development of a management plan requires a collective approach in order to develop and integrate a shared vision across the State Party and its various bodies, local and regional government, civil society and other economic actors. By reaching out across these different sectors a collaborative and participatory approach to resolve issues of knowledge-sharing, governance, conservation and development can be achieved.

Management planning for the Baie du Mont-Saint-Michel clearly recognises the need to integrate three vital elements:

- Protect the landscape and ecological potential of the bay.
- Reconcile the diversity of human uses which underpin the dynamic nature of the bay.
- Preserve the integrity of the bay as a whole.

The human interactions with the natural environment comprise part of the ecological character of the bay and contribute to its cultural values. The high rates of primary production in the bay support extensive shellfish and sea fishing activities; agricultural land management surrounds the tidal areas of the bay and extends onto the saltmarsh meadows; the stunning built structures and the attractive landscape attracts a growing number of tourists; and the diverse coastline provides opportunities for diverse leisure activities including kayaking, sailing, hiking and cycling. However, all these activities exert increasing and cumulative pressures on the biological richness of the bay. In addition, concerns have been raised regarding the impacts of wind turbines on the bay's aesthetic value. Through a collaborative and participatory approach, including workshops and photographic exhibitions, different sectoral representatives, civil society and the government have been made more aware of the need to understand the interactions between these various activities and of the need to find more sustainable approaches in order to maintain the Outstanding Universal Value of the bay.



Monk sitting in a cloister at Mont-Saint-Michel abbey, France (Credit: Hemis / Alamy Stock Photo)

Future outlook

It could be argued that, without robust management measures in place, the bay may become a victim of its own cultural significance. Tourists are placing ever-increasing pressures on the site, not just through their physical footprint within the labyrinth of thoroughfares but through the need for parking and access to the islet. More widely, the need to generate sustainable energy through wind turbines threatens the landscape aesthetic. However, these issues have been recognised formally by the State Party and actions have been taken to establish a wind turbine exclusion zone, to redesign the access route to the islet and to manage car parking in order to reduce impacts on the site.

All of these issues are to be embedded into the management plan that recognises the interdependencies between the natural and human elements of the bay. The first “Conference of the Bay” (*Conférence de la baie*) was held in December 2016 to progress the management planning process. The Conference invited representatives from the environmental and cultural sectors including nature conservation and heritage organisations, historians, heads of state services, local authorities officers, economic actors, religious congregations and parliamentarians from Brittany and Normandy. At the Conference, the *Préfète de la Région Normandie*, Nicole Klein, recognised the need to engage in a participatory management process that embraced the various human and cultural elements of the site, by stating that:

“The founding idea of the Conference of the Bay is to involve all stakeholders in the reflections on the future of the Bay of Mont-Saint-Michel: the State, Norman and Breton territorial communities but also socio-professional actors and representatives of civil society.”

Within this forum it will be possible to share views and exchange information in order to develop a coordinated strategic vision for the bay that raises the collective awareness of the universal value to humanity of the cultural and natural heritage of the area. As Erick Goupil, President of the Schéma de Cohérence Territoriale (Inter-SCoT) harmonised territorial plan for Normandy and Brittany, has stated:

“The management plan must convince not compel.”

Lessons learned

The Baie du Mont-Saint-Michel represents a spectacular juxtaposition of a masterpiece of human creative genius alongside dynamic and diverse wetland habitats supporting a rich wildlife. The following key lessons can be learned from this example:

- The Outstanding Universal Value and the ecological character of the area depend on the relationships between the human and natural elements.
- Maintaining the correct balance between these components is essential for the future of the area and should form a key component of any site management planning.
- The ongoing management planning process recognises this need and acknowledges that a sustainable future is only possible if all the cultural aspects, including heritage, socio-economics and development, are understood by all stakeholders.
- For a management plan to be successful, this knowledge should be integrated with an understanding of the sensitivity of the various ecological components and processes in the context of a collaborative and cooperative approach.