

# **STRANGFORD LOUGH MANAGEMENT SCHEME CASE HISTORY**

**prepared by the Strangford Lough Office  
on behalf of the Environment and Heritage Service,  
Department of the Environment**

## **A. General description and features of conservation importance**

Strangford Lough is a fjord like inlet, 30 km long, on the east coast of Northern Ireland. At its entrance the fast flowing tides of the Narrows rush through a central Y-shaped channel, up to 60m deep, past rich and colourful tidal communities. In complete contrast the northern end consists of wide expanses of intertidal sand flats with eelgrass, shellfish and worms making the Lough very attractive for overwintering birds.

Between these two extremes of rock and sand there are many kinds of shore. The Lough has over 70 islands and many rocky pladdies. The surrounding land is characterised by rolling drumlins with many small farms and some larger estates. Sub-tidally it is just as rich and diverse. It has been designated/classified for the following interest features:

- i) under the Habitats Directive, for large shallow inlet and bay;
- ii) under the Birds Directive for
  - a) light bellied brent goose
  - b) redshank
  - c) knot
  - d) breeding sandwich tern
  - e) breeding common tern
  - f) breeding arctic tern
  - g) the overwintering bird population

## **B. Socio-economic characteristics**

Strangford Lough is very close to Belfast and within an hour's drive of 1 million people. Trawling and dredging for scallops and prawns along with potting for crabs and lobsters takes place. There is a degree of jostling for space between them, the yachtsmen and the aquaculturists. The area is increasingly a tourist destination and recreational facility and motorised water sports are growing. Meanwhile people continue to enjoy walking and sightseeing around the Lough. But with all this activity there are growing concerns for disturbance to wildlife.

As well as the varied interests on the water there is a very complex system of land ownership, lease-holding, and public rights, especially with respect to the inter-tidal / foreshore area. Landowners are not always amenable to environmental management. There is some resistance from stakeholders to having any kind of management forced upon them by government. Early designations were not well received, particularly the introduction of Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) legislation in 1988. At that time Government was heavily criticised for lack of consultation and for not taking account of local interests.

## **C. Relevant and competent authorities**

Department of the Environment:

Environment and Heritage Service;  
Planning Service;  
Roads service;  
Water Service;

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development:

Fisheries Division;  
Rivers Agency;

Ards Borough Council;  
Down District Council;  
Crown Estate;

### **Other Bodies**

The National Trust

Strangford Lough Management Committee (SLMC):

Ards Borough Council  
Association of Strangford Lough Yacht Clubs  
Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside  
Down District Council  
Joint Council of Wildfowling Associations for Strangford Lough  
Minister's Nominees  
National Trust  
Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association  
Northern Ireland Environment Link  
Northern Ireland Federation of Sub-Aqua Clubs  
Northern Ireland Fish Producers Organisation Ltd  
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds  
Royal Yachting Association  
Shellfish Association of GB  
Sports Council for Northern Ireland  
Strangford Lough Fisherman's Association  
Strangford Lough Nature Conservation Association  
Ulster Farmers Union  
Ulster Wildlife Trust

## **D. Management structures**

Following the difficulties with the introduction of the ASSIs, the SLMC was set up as an advisory committee to Government in 1993. It brings the different stakeholder interests together including recreation interests, conservation bodies, fishing organisations, farmers unions, and yachting associations. The Committee's remit covers all aspects of the Lough's management and it is working towards a shared vision for the area. The Committee is now well established and, seven years on, meetings are still very well attended with local and specialist interests sitting down together to debate issues of common concern.

A Liaison Group has been set up to co-ordinate effort across government departments, relevant authorities, the National Trust and the Strangford Lough Office. A good working relationship between the Committee and the Liaison Group is essential. This is being achieved through having the Strangford Lough Office included on the Liaison Group.

## **E. Key events**

### **August 1999**

SLMC offered the expertise and support of its Office to work with the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) to develop the European marine site management scheme. It was agreed that the Office should produce a blueprint document, including collation of information on current status of the features, and undertaking informal consultation on factors and monitoring. The Committee was keen not to lose the momentum that had been built up among relevant authorities and others to take forward some related projects eg the Strangford Lough Information Network.

It was important that the work of the Office should not compromise SLMC's independent advisory status. Therefore the final production of the Management Scheme and formal consultation remained the duty of EHS.

The Strangford Lough Office, working informally with Committee members and other bodies made the following contribution:

- a blueprint for the Management Scheme – including a management structure;
- draft factors tables and related action plan;
- draft monitoring programme;
- collaborative projects (particularly in relation to communications and data sharing).

One proposal in the blueprint was the setting up of an acceptable management structure. This is based on DETR guidelines but has been adapted to accommodate the pre-existing Strangford Lough Management Committee and the Strangford Lough Office (see above).

The mechanisms used were as follows:

- Themed workshops and meetings with Lough users, landowners and statutory bodies
- Review of scientific research and monitoring activities
- Discussion papers for consideration by the statutory bodies
- Access to SLMC own reference material
- Informal consultation with members
- Formal consultation response to EHS document

### **February - May 99**

SLMC Common Seal Research and Management Workshop. The resulting Report has been a useful reference for the Management Scheme and its recommendations are now particularly important as the Common Seal has been listed as an additional SAC feature.

SLMC Conservation Objectives working group commenced to assist EHS in drafting Conservation Objectives and Favourable Condition Tables.

Strangford Lough Information Network was established by SLMC following research into communication needs in the Lough and with a view to playing a role in the emerging management system for the European site.

## **June - Sept 99**

English Nature, Environment and Heritage Service and the Strangford Lough Office met to discuss requirements under the Management Scheme and agreed a plan of action. Contract for GIS pilot prepared and consultants appointed. Researcher appointed to collate data and information for the Management Scheme, GIS and the Information Network. Informal consultation on aspects of the management scheme took place. Liaison group was established. Discussions on data requirements took place, biotope classification and mapping extent and location of species / communities.

## **October - December 99**

Several workshops were held to discuss factors and management mechanisms. A temporary Information Network Officer was appointed and a presentation on GIS pilot was given to key players to allow them an opportunity to shape the system, to highlight potential problems and to encourage support.

## **January - April 2000**

Management Scheme blueprint handed over to EHS and revisions made to produce Draft 2. Formal consultation began allowing further revisions to be made.

## **May - July 2000**

Information Network was formally launched by the Minister of the Environment to coincide with the production of a public information booklet and management handbooks. A series of discussions held with information providers for the GIS. Third draft of management scheme produced and further public consultation took place.

## **August - December 2000**

A monitoring workshop was held at the end of August. Several Liaison Group meetings were held to agree a monitoring programme and Action Plan. Revisions made to third draft of management scheme. A presentation was given to the UK Marine SACs Conference in Edinburgh.

## **February 2001 - present**

Final comments incorporated into management scheme. New interest features added to the site and incorporated into the Scheme. New projects identified under the Action Plan are being taken forward. Information Network website launched in the summer. A public information booklet to be produced by end July. It is hoped to launch the management scheme in August 2002.

## **F. Budgets and resources**

Information to be supplied at a later date.

## **G. List of key documents**

With the designation of Strangford Lough Marine Nature Reserve in July 1995, the associated consultation documents played a major role in providing a sound basis for the introduction of the European marine site. These include:

*Modiolus* monitoring report  
Benthic habitat mapping report  
Biotope mapping report  
Strangford Lough website <http://www.strangfordlough.org>

## **H. Review of learning and good practice**

### **1. Information to support management scheme**

#### ***Conservation Objectives***

During discussions on draft conservation objectives SLMC requested that the Department liaise with experts and authorities involved in the UK Marine SACs Project to seek their comments on the work being done for Strangford Lough. As a result the Strangford Lough Office set up a meeting involving EHS staff, JNCC, RSPB HQ and regional staff, and DARD Aquatic Science Division which provided some very useful pointers for setting conservation objectives, related targets and monitoring.

#### ***Collation of Scientific Information and Presentation of Data***

Scientific research and monitoring information collation proved particularly difficult as information was hard to locate, extract and align with other work. However, the considerable amount of material which was collated informed the management scheme and also provided data for a pilot GIS project.

SLMC had previously installed ArcView GIS software and had started to map various themes. As part of the Management Scheme, EHS funded consultants to develop the system with the Strangford Lough Office. It is intended that the Liaison Group will continue to contribute data and information to this system and it will be used to present an overview of habitats, communities and human activities as required for management purposes.

#### ***Workshops***

Several workshops proved to be invaluable for a number of reasons:

- a. the presentations helped to bring a range of information together;
- b. the feedback and discussion helped to improve the content of the scheme;
- c. people were kept informed of the progress of the Management Scheme and felt that they were contributing - helping to avoid negative reactions; and
- d. the workshops helped to generate interest in the final document and the ongoing implementation of the Scheme.

In each case the objectives of the workshop were clearly defined and reviewed against the outcome afterwards. This helped to maintain a clear focus.

#### ***Factors with the potential to affect the conservation features***

The Strangford Lough Office arranged and facilitated a workshop on Factors with the potential to affect the features on 12 October 1999. The workshop was attended by statutory bodies, specialist interests and Lough user groups, including members of SLMC. The workshop took the

form of presentations on different kinds of human activities around the Lough and their effects on the environment followed by questions and comments. This workshop, informal liaison with SLMC and the *Strangford Lough Marine Nature Reserve Guide to Designation* were used to draft factors tables for the management scheme.

### ***Monitoring Programme***

The Strangford Lough Office invited those organisations directly involved in monitoring work in Strangford Lough and SLMC members to a Monitoring workshop in August 2000.

DARD Fisheries, Aquatic Science, Environment and Heritage Service, Industrial Research and Technology Unit, local councils, University of Ulster, Queen's University, Ulster Wildlife Trust, National Trust and SLMC members presented different aspects of monitoring work undertaken to date, and posed questions with regard to how monitoring might be undertaken in the future, referring to the management scheme as appropriate.

The presentations and discussions from this workshop were used as the basis for a draft monitoring programme which was produced by the Strangford Lough Office. This programme was further developed and refined through a series of meetings and document revisions involving mainly DARD Aquatic Science, EHS and the National Trust. The monitoring programme was agreed by the Liaison Group and a summary was incorporated into the draft management scheme.

## **2. Methods of relevant authorities and stakeholder participation**

### ***Connecting people***

In developing the management scheme it became clear that the statutory bodies are even more disparate than the users of Strangford Lough. Informal discussions on how the area should be managed provided a valuable forum for officers from different departments and local government to meet and discuss. There have also been some very encouraging developments with respect to different bodies coming together to address potentially controversial issues such as commercial shellfish collection.

### ***Wider connections***

Good communication is essential for the implementation of the management scheme. Effective communication with the general public, who are needed to influence politicians and as Lough users, is especially important. SLMC started to address this problem in 1998 by commissioning research on what people knew or wanted to know about the Lough and its management. The research involved face to face interviews with the public and workshops involving interest groups and statutory bodies.

The SLMC communications strategy sets out to address the needs identified through this research and led to the setting up of the Strangford Lough Information Network in 1999. This collaborative project is steered by local councils, the National Trust, EHS and SLMC. The Network operates through the Strangford Lough Office but is very much a partnership with input and support from a wide range of organisations. The Network has helped to develop a common identity on Strangford Lough that many organisations can buy into in an informal way.

The Network has already developed a range of materials. Some are aimed at those involved in the Lough's management, such as Handbooks with bibliographies, directories of contacts and info on environmental designations sections. Others are aimed at the general public such as the 'Out and

About' booklets that give information on how to access the Lough while at the same time promoting sensitive use of the environment.

Each organisation benefits directly in some way. The Network complements local councils' tourism development work, raises the profile of the Marine Nature Reserve and environmental management by EHS, and recognises the National Trust's key role in the management of the Lough.

### ***Collaboration***

Linking projects and plans under a strategic framework is an essential part of the approach being taken at Strangford, which is heavily dependent on using what is already in place. For example the existing National Trust's Strangford Lough Wildlife Scheme will meet many of the SPA conservation objectives. The benefit of this approach is that it demands that the Scheme's environmental objectives are embedded into different organisations' own work programmes. There are fears that without an overarching single authority this approach may not work and only time will tell – it may be the best solution for this area at this point in time.

Working in collaboration is not always easy. However, the management scheme is helping to develop shared objectives and many bodies have already shown considerable commitment to making this work. The neutrality of SLMC, its purely advisory status and its emphasis on face-to face communication has helped to bring people together, breakdown barriers and enlist support.

### ***Some recommendations:***

Timing: Allow each organisation to slot environmental management objectives into its own agenda and work plans.

Flexibility: Avoid being prescriptive, use stepping stones, be opportunistic, be prepared to adapt to new scientific information and changing circumstances

## **3. Process and content of the management scheme document**

In November 1998 a report entitled "Strangford Lough - a strategy for sustainable development was produced. This report was commissioned by Planning Service, EHS, local councils, the Sports Council for NI, and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board with support from the Strangford Lough Management Committee. It includes findings from public consultation over two years. This report provided a useful framework within which the management scheme has been developed.

### ***Management Objectives and Action Plan***

The Management Objectives and Action Plan (chapter 6 of the Management Scheme) were developed from the requirements of the Habitats Regulations, workshop findings and informal discussions.

Two Workshops were held at the end of 1999, with officers from the government departments, relevant authorities and others involved in the Liaison Group. The first of these concentrated on the regulation of activities, while the second explored existing and potential delivery mechanisms. The outcome included proposals for a management structure, collaborative wardening, extension of the role of the Strangford Lough Office, communication needs, means of regulation and the role of relevant authorities in the management of Strangford Lough.

#### **4. Interpretation and publicity**

Much of the publicity for Strangford Lough was generated prior to its selection as a candidate SAC when, in 1995, it was the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Nature Reserve to be declared in the UK. The MNR process involved a consultation document and a 'Guide to Designation', as well as a number of leaflets to highlight the marine importance of the Lough. All of these pre-date the SAC process.

'Strangford Lough Online' ([www.strangfordlough.org](http://www.strangfordlough.org)) is a gateway website produced through the Strangford Lough Information Network. This is a collaboration between Environment and Heritage Service, Ards Borough Council, Down District Council, the SLMC and The National Trust.