

Implications and Recommendations for Management of Recreation on the Exe

Overview

This document accompanies the Exe Disturbance Report and provides some suggestions for options that could reduce disturbance and impacts to the Exe Estuary SPA. Further work, involving people who use the estuary, is required to develop the options.

In general we suggest that key aims of management should be:

- Reducing the numbers of people on the intertidal around the Duck Pond, at Lympstone and to a lesser extent at Starcross South, particularly dog walkers and bait diggers.
- Focusing kitesurfing and windsurfing use to the off-shore areas of the Maer such that users are using the area to the south of Pole Sands and not drifting towards or tacking close to Dawlish Warren.
- For kitesurfers and windsurfers using the Duck Pond area, use should be focused around the high tide period and a clearly marked area be defined where use is encouraged, focusing activity away from the eastern and western shore and focusing use around the main channel.
- Kitesurfing and windsurfing north of Lympstone should only take place during the period April – mid July.
- Ensuring undisturbed roost sites remain at Dawlish Warren.
- Ensuring that the existing areas that are relatively undisturbed – such as Shutterton Creek – remain that way
- Ensuring one off and erratic events such as the hovercraft use recorded in 2011 are picked up, reported and stopped.
- Cessation of vehicles parking on, and driving on, the intertidal, particularly at the Duck Pond, at Lympstone and at Topsham.

Current management

- The Exe Estuary area benefits from combined partnership working to seek its sustainable management and use. The Exe Estuary Management Partnership includes the relevant local planning authorities, the County Council, Natural England and the RSPB. The Partnership produces a management plan for the estuary, with the current plan running from 2006 to 2011

- The Partnership already produces a range of literature including leaflets and maps that highlight key locations for activities. There are also codes of conduct in place for kitesurfing, crab collecting and a generic 'shore and water' code.
- Navigation bye laws for the estuary include a 10 knot speed limit, and defined areas for personal water craft, powerboats and water skiing. During the summer 2011 a patrol boat has helped enforce the byelaws and promote responsible behaviour by water-based users. The boat is however dependent on volunteers, operates mostly in the summer and is only occasionally on the water.
- Dawlish Warren National Nature Reserve is managed by Teignbridge District Council. Wardens are present near the key roost locations at high tide periods from September to March to minimise disturbance. Boardwalks, marked routes and education/awareness raising help to reduce impacts to the SAC. A bye law prevents access for dog walking to half of the Warren (beyond groyne 9) and users are also required to pick-up after their dog anywhere on the site. Dogs must also be on short leads at all times within the main dune area. There is a code of conduct for water use, this includes a voluntary no landing zone. A warden is usually present watching over the roost when the tide is above 3.2m and occurs during daylight hours.
- Bowling Green Marsh and Exminster Marshes are managed by the RSPB. Hides and other infrastructure are in place and various education programmes etc. are in place to encourage access and enable people to view the area and birds, without causing disturbance.

Options to reduce or manage disturbance in the future

Creation of new facilities and alternative sites

- The creation of alternative sites to divert visitors from sensitive sites has been widely promoted as a means to resolve issues relating to new development and impacts from access. It would seem intuitive that increasing the amount of green infrastructure, the levels of visitor use on nearby sensitive sites such as SPAs would decrease. The issues are however complex. With highly attractive sites like the Exe Estuary it is difficult to imagine how green infrastructure may serve as a viable alternative for many activities. They are most likely to work for activities that are not specific to the estuary and where combined with on-site management measures that may serve to deter visitors to the Exe (e.g. changes to parking or dog control orders in certain areas). The following may have merit and perhaps warrant further work to explore potential:
- **Provision of new/enhanced dog walking areas.** Provision of new dedicated locations for dog walking would be one potential way of drawing users away from locations such as the Duck Pond area. Alternatively there may be existing areas that could be enhanced or promoted for dog walking.
- **Enhancement/new facilities for water sports.** There may be opportunities to provide areas for launching etc. away from the estuary, for example along the coast. Locations where trailers etc. can be parked will draw jet ski users and others. Washdown

facilities, changing areas, safe storage for keys/valuables, and dedicated areas where kites/boards/windsurfs/sails and other equipment can be set-up may serve to draw particular users.

- It is also possible to provide '**alternative sites**' for birds, for example there are published accounts of the effectiveness of artificial roost sites for waders (Burton, Evans, & Robinson 1996). The existing main oystercatcher roost site in front of the hide at Dawlish Warren is an artificial island. Any work to create additional roost sites would be potentially complicated if within the estuary, as works could have consequences for deposition or tidal flows. Outside the estuary there may be potential to create alternative roost sites on adjacent land. The options and consideration of alternative roost sites has obvious links to the management of sea-defences and relevant coastal strategies.

On-site access management

- There is potential to enhance the current zones and allocated space for different activities. Zoning should be clear, consistently mapped and clearly marked in the estuary.
- **Zoning** options should include a kitesurfing zone such that kitesurfing and windsurfing are restricted to a defined area inside the estuary and off the sea-front during the period September-March (inclusive). Within the estuary such a zone should extend off the recreation ground but ensure that users keep well away from both sides of the estuary. Ideally use inside the estuary would be limited to two hours either side of high tide. Outside the estuary the zone should ensure use is directly off Exmouth seafront and to the south of Pole Sands. A line of buoys could be used to mark a particular area here and use focused offshore, avoiding the inshore areas used by grebes etc.
- The area highlighted for powerboating in the existing navigation byelaws should be relocated (potentially outside the estuary) away from the main feeding areas.
- The current water skiing zone may need to move slightly to make space for kitesurfers and windsurfers, but otherwise appears adequate.
- Zoning should ideally be backed-up by byelaws and designed through work with local user groups and stakeholders. It should be part of a package of measures, including revised codes of conduct. With both kitesurfing and windsurfing users are generally responsible people who are receptive to the issues surrounding use of the estuary and the needs of the wildlife, indeed a voluntary code of conduct has already been developed by the local kite surfers. Furthermore most users are closely linked to the community – for example there is a kitesurfing community centred around Edge Watersports making kitesurfers a relatively easy group to contact. Users will be most likely to alter their behaviour if measures are established through close working with the groups. There is the potential to enhance facilities, for example changes to the parking restrictions at the Duck Pond where the existing 3 hour limit is too short or better washdown facilities and showers. Improvements to the facilities at the Imperial Recreation Ground could be provided in exchange for management measures such as

user registration/permit system with numbered clothing (e.g. high-visibility vests with a number on the back to be worn over the life-jacket) or another form of identification to be used whilst out on the water. Such a permit system could ensure that users have adequate insurance, have agreed to comply with a code of conduct and it will provide a means to trace those users who do not comply with the code of conduct. Given the importance of Edge Watersports to the kiting community, it may be useful for Edge staff to take a key role in the administration of management and for them to promote the changes and encourage compliance. The permit system may need some provision for occasional day visitors – for example local shops could have a limited number of day passes/vests etc. that can be signed out by day visitors. The permit system would therefore ensure all users could be identified, named and contacted. The annual renewal of permits would allow zones to be changed as necessary (for example, given the dynamic nature of coastal habitats, over time different areas may become important for birds).

- There is an existing **patrol boat**, but there is potential to extend the amount of time this is on the water and enhance its effectiveness. The boat would be most effective at reducing disturbance if backed up by new zoning and byelaws aimed at ensuring reduced disturbance to key locations. It would also be necessary for the boat to be operative during the winter. Key times would be when the weather was suitable for water sports, and when, for example kitesurfers and windsurfers are at risk of being blown onto Dawlish Warren, or possibly tacking close to the Warren (i.e. in a southerly or south-westerly). It will be important to establish how those operating the patrol boat could be most effective. It should be possible to minimise actual disturbance from the boat itself through careful operation.
- There is currently access for vehicles onto the intertidal at a number of locations, and particularly at the Duck Pond many people park on the intertidal to avoid parking charges and the three hour limit on parking. At the Duck Pond the slipway is used to gain **vehicular access onto the beach**. A barrier system or bollards at the base of the slipway could serve to limit vehicular access, alternatively removing the three hour parking limit or providing a season ticket may be effective.
- There is potential to **limit foot access** to the intertidal areas at certain locations. One particular location is the survey location at Starcross South. Here there is a lay-by and a railway crossing. After crossing the railway the only way for people to walk is out across the mudflats. Survey data shows this location primarily used by bait diggers and walkers, with a small number of dog walkers. If the crossing were closed access levels may reduce in this area, helping to maintain this area of the estuary as the least disturbed and ensuring an area (at Shutterton Creek) where disturbance levels will be low.
- **Restrictions on dog walking** could be targeted at Exmouth (Duck Pond area), Lympstone, and possibly Topsham. Options for managing dog walking would include dog control orders. The Dog Control Orders Regulations provide for five offences which may be included in a Dog Control Order: failing to remove dog faeces; not keeping a dog

on a lead; not putting, and keeping, a dog on a lead when directed to do so by an authorised officer; permitting a dog to enter land from which dogs are excluded; and taking more than a specified number of dogs onto land. A Dog Control Order can be made in respect of any land which is open to the air and to which the public are entitled or permitted to have access (with or without payment). Orders to keep dogs on leads would potentially be effective at reducing disturbance at Topsham (Goat Walk), Powderham and Lymptone. At Exmouth excluding dogs from the Duck Pond area entirely would be necessary.

- **Fencing/screening etc** and landscaping works provide opportunities to direct visitors and screen people. Two areas where this might be effective are the golf course at Dawlish Warren, where fencing near the eastern end of the course could prevent golfers from straying onto the mudflats to retrieve golf balls, and at Exmouth near the Duck Pond, where low vegetation or fencing around parts of the car-park may help stop dogs and people from walking onto the mudflats.
- **Wardening** of sensitive locations is effective in reducing disturbance, particularly if the wardens are able to refer users to byelaws and other statutory measures (e.g. SSSI legislation). Wardens/rangers could essentially be functioning in a policing role, ensuring face to face contact with users, recognising individuals and where warranted enforcing byelaws. There is already wardening in place at Dawlish Warren, and there is clearly merit in considering extending this into August. This would have particular implications for staffing levels given the high levels of recreational use at the site at this time of year, and may be difficult to implement.
- It could be possible for a mobile 'warden' or ranger (or small team of rangers) to be employed by local authorities and to have an estuary-wide remit. These staff could use the patrol boat and be on shore at key locations. The visible presence on the estuary, and potential to talk directly to people to explain changes is likely to be important in getting measures off-the ground and working.

Communication and awareness raising

- Informal discussion with many recreational users around the estuary suggests that they value the estuary and its wildlife, yet don't appreciate the impact of their activity. Conversation with dog walkers at Exmouth, for example, suggests that they choose to walk on the mud flats because the dogs are able to run free, there is lots of space and no requirement to pick up. There is clear scope for guidance, interpretation and better communication with users. Open communication and dialogue is likely to be necessary to ensure successful implementation of measures without local hostility or opposition. There are various ways that this can be achieved:
 - **Face to face contact** on site with access users, for example by rangers, wardens or countryside officers (see above).
 - **Websites** promoting access in particular areas, directing use and raising awareness.

- **Direct contact with clubs and groups:** for example through attending club meetings and events (e.g. sailing clubs) or participating in forums and on-line discussion groups. This would include work to design effective zoning, codes of conduct etc. Where there is no local group/contact, there may be merit in helping to establish local user groups. The route maps and GIS data developed through this project should help discussion and provide a good basis for discussion of where different users go.
 - **Interpretation and signage**
 - **Articles in the local press and media**
 - **Leaflets**
- Many of the above already take place and the Exe Estuary Management Partnership fulfils an umbrella role, organising events such as the annual estuary festival and the Exe Forum. There are opportunities to enhance communication and potentially ensure a more coherent approach, for example through consistent branding etc. The Partnership would be ideally placed to ensure this consistency. Standard signage and notices around the estuary that give a clear message as to which types of access are welcomed and why restrictions are in place should be part of any package of measures.

Monitoring

- The key locations for the nature conservation interest and the status of those species will change over time. Recreation patterns will also vary over time, with factors such as climate, coastal erosion and the popularity/trends of different activities likely to influence access. Monitoring will therefore be an important element within any package of measures. Monitoring should be tailored to pick up 'early-warning' of any new issues and should ensure that measures that are in place are working effectively. Monitoring of birds will continue through WeBS, but monitoring of access will be necessary to link to the WeBS data.

Reference

Burton, N.H.K., Evans, P.R. & Robinson, M.A. (1996) Effects on Shorebird Numbers of Disturbance, the Loss of a Roost Site and Its Replacement by an Artificial Island at Hartlepool, Cleveland. *Biological Conservation*, **77**, 193-201.