

## EXE ESTUARY MANAGEMENT PARTNERSHIP



### PUBLIC CONSULTATION: Zonation & Codes of Conduct

Group: Devon Wildfowling and Conservation Association

Venue: The Devon Hotel, Old Matford Lane, Exeter

Date: 3pm Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> April 2017

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#### Present:

Stephanie Clark - SC  
Rowena Garne - RG  
Matt Greenhaugh - MG

Scott Harding – SH  
Pat Gubb – PG

#### Introductions

- **SC** – Exe Estuary Officer for the Exe Estuary Management Partnership, currently undertaking the zonation of the Exe as Voluntary exclusion zones to protect bird life as commissioned by South East Devon Habitat Regulations Partnership. Acts as a communication route for users and relevant authorities.
- **RG** – Environment Group Apprentice at Devon County Council, providing administrative support to Steph during these zonation meetings
- **MG** – Wildfowling Officer for British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC)
- **SH** – Honourable Secretary for Devon Wildfowling and Conservation Association (DWCA) and point of contact
- **PG** – Conservation Officer for Devon Wildfowling and Conservation Association

#### Apologies

- Nick Millman, Devon Wildfowling and Conservation Association Club Chairman

**MG** – BASC (British Association for Shooting and Conservation) which was previously known as WAGBI (Wildfowling Association of Great Britain and Ireland) was founded in 1908. Covering all aspects of shooting and fire arms including licensing. It is the largest country sports organisation in the UK with over 148000 members. BASC has worked in partnership with many different statutory bodies including the police and government. The club is spread across the UK and advises on best practice for shooting. Approximately 146 wildfowling clubs in Devon Wildfowling and Conservation Association (DWCA).

**SC** – Background on the public consultation on zonation. Commissioned by South East Devon Habitat Regulations Partnership (SEDHRP) to undertake a consultation on the review of zonation for two sites on the estuary; these are Voluntary Exclusion Zones (VEZs) in Dawlish Warren and Exmouth.

**MG** - Who sits on SEDHRP?

**SC** – Include EEMP, RSPB, District Council Representatives from Teignbridge and East Devon, Exeter City Council Representative, Natural England, Devon Wildlife Trust, etc. who sit on officer working group.

**MG** – Requested more information about the proposals. Exclusion for wildfowling proposed?

**SC** – These are voluntary zones – no enforcement. This has been undertaken to find out how people use these areas and how best to zone them for continued and safe use whilst protecting as much of the habitats as we can. The areas chosen are the most designated areas on the estuary. (Referring to eelgrass map) eelgrass is found in both of the proposed VEZs and is an important feeding ground, especially for protected birds such as Brent Geese from September to December. The whole estuary is designated as a Special Protection Area (SPA), Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and a Ramsar site. Dawlish Warren is a Special Area of Conservation (SAC), National Nature Reserve (NNR), Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Local Nature Reserve (LNR). Dawlish Warren is especially significant due to the high tide roosts in the area. Exmouth is designated as a LNR.

(Showing initial maps of both VEZs) these were the initial proposals for the exclusion zones at Exmouth and Dawlish Warren. DW is at all states of the tide and all year round, the line may be reduced down for the purpose of sailing/angling access.

Exmouth – follows the kite surfer's existing voluntary exclusion zone which has been in place for approximately eight years. It is now being proposed to encompass all users; however power boaters have a byelaw allowing them to use the area. The idea for dog walkers is to guide them away from the area from slipway by essentially saying don't turn right. Suitable Alternative Natural Green Space (SANGS) for dog walkers are being obtained by councils to offer good local alternatives for dog walkers to make use of.

**MG** – Background on BASC.

- Very versed in partner group working, lease from RSPB, and Natural Trust. Degree of misunderstanding when it comes to wildfowling, it is not the same as game shooting.
- There are videos available on the BASC website, a good suggestion would be "Wildfowling – an introduction": <https://basc.org.uk/films/2013/04/22/an-introduction-to-wildfowling/>. It is a solitary activity, individuals pick a spot on the estuary and sit still to conceal themselves – individuals can take many trips without firing a single shot, low impact and low take activity. Includes people who learn about the birds and about the tides. Lots of wildfowling on estuaries across the country which include highly designated areas. Wildfowling do not encourage flight like game hunters do, shoot when birds are in flight anyway.
- Controlled by regulations: Wildlife and Countryside Act, Firearms Act 1968, Environment Protection and Conservation Act 1999 (controls use of shot materials), Natural England consenting mechanism, to ensure disturbance is low. Habitats and Birds Directives.
- The club mechanisms work to a set of rules.
- Large amount of experience – the clubs know what is constituted as a high amount of activity (and therefore disturbance)
- Codes of practice – on website. Members adhere to a guide for acceptable conduct. Brief overview of law- it is a well-regulated activity.

**SH** –

- New member has a probationary 12 month period and has to pass several tests, including a test on the birds and a test on law.
- Permit areas for shooting, with limited numbers shooting at any one time.
- Dogs kept on leads – whilst accessing, leaving and during time there. The dogs are all highly trained and it is a rule they must have a dog – this is so any birds shot are not left on the estuary but are collected (by the dog) and brought home with the member.

**MG** –

- Shoot species on statutory list under Wildlife Countryside Act – during season.
- Members are not allowed to sell the birds that they shoot therefore there is no commercial benefit to this act.

**SH** – Club rules – large document – includes many items including severe weather restrictions

**PG** – 2010 hard weather, stopped early as birds were struggling and there was a significant reduction in bird numbers. Early two weeks before official regulations meant they had to stop.

**SH** –

- Code of practice – condensed shooting field document. Induction for Exmouth area in which you must sign an induction document which details all the dos and don'ts.
- Safe access and entry to marshland.
- Non-toxic shot used.

**MG** – Zero degrees over whole country often warrants a voluntary stop from shooting – it becomes statutory after 14 days but most clubs stop before that.

**SH** – We monitor temperature at a local level and then often make decisions, e.g. if the temperature on the Exe is lower than the rest of the country we often voluntarily stop the season early even without a countrywide issue.

**SC** – Dog walkers – raise awareness as dogs off of lead often cause bird flight as birds naturally see them as predators whereas some activities they can get used to. Want to raise awareness for all users. However, we do want to stress that if your safety is at risk then you can obviously use the zone and there will be no penalty for this.

**MG** –

- Keen to avoid adverse publicity on what is an agreed and consented activity.
- We recognise the need for conservation.

**SC** –

- We want to heavily promote the zones and have sent out a press release, we will also have Habitat Mitigation Officers on site to raise awareness and educate visitors.
- Crab tilers will continue to use their area, however will adhere to a code of conduct.
- Will promote these activities and their historic background.
- Are considering installing a sign by the bird screen in Exmouth to explain what wildfowlers do and that they have consent.

**SH** – Promotion is what will make this work and we would be happy to help with handing out leaflets, etc.

**PG** – We have a pool of volunteers.

**MG** – Do act as wardens – and have many cases of working with statutory agencies.

**PG** –

- We did our own count on Brent Geese in Exmouth and Dawlish Warren for 5-6 years.
- We also have a legal requirement to fill out bag returns which do have a comments section in which we can put in any activity that may be damaging the estuary, e.g. if we saw someone damaging the environment.

**SH** –

- We may have scope for a small donation to a sign on the estuary – maybe £10-20, especially if it promotes our activity and explains what we do and how we operate.
- I understand you have a festival in the summer which we could potentially have stand at. We have had stands at many events including the County Show, regional game shows etc.
- Some members join purely for the social element and conservation and not the shooting.

**SC** – Ongoing monitoring will take place at these sites, if voluntary zones work that will be great, however if they don't work statutory measures may have to be explored.

**PG** – Who will be monitoring?

**SC** – Habitat Mitigation Officers (SEDHRP) and others within relevant authorities.

**PG** – Would you like us to complete a detailed observation during our time on the estuary?

**SC** – Would be excellent to work with you on this. Can provide standard monitoring sheets.

**MG** – Concerned that a year of monitoring isn't a long time.

**SC** – It will be ongoing monitoring, but likely to be analysed after a year.

**MG** – What statutory measures might be put in place?

**SC** – Would be dependent on who is causing the disturbance, if it one user group in particular or multiple user groups, etc.

**PG** – In the 50s there was a big conservation drive which is the reason for the clubs being set up – all the clubs have a large range of dos and don'ts.

**MG** –

- Poole Harbour disturbance study showed that wildfowlers cause a 004% disturbance to birds and this could increase 500 times and still would not affect birds. A second PhD study is being looked into, could possibly take place on the Exe.
- Footprint's Disturbance Study was produced and although wildfowlers were mentioned they were not listed an issue for disturbance.

**SC** –

- Have had comments at previous meetings, some users concerned about disturbance from wildfowlers. Potentially just perceived views and requires more awareness-raising about the activity?

**PG** –

- For most wildfowlers it is more about being there – I was a birdwatcher before I was a wildfowler.
- Disturbance has been tested using blanks to see how close the birds need to be before the shot affects them.

**SC** – We are currently reviewing codes of conduct but I'm not sure you need one since there are so many procedures in place already for your activity.

**MG** – We have our own code of conduct on the BASC website which is general but can be applied to most places.

**SH** – DWCA happy to take SC, RG and others out on site to learn more about what they do.

**SC** – Are there particular birds that you shoot on the estuary?

**PG** – Mallard, Widgeon, Teal, Canada geese, occasional Pintail – there is no open season for Brent geese as they are under special protection.

**SH** – Often bird watch whilst waiting for birds – you often won't find a wildfowler without a pair of binoculars. Just want to take a sustainable harvest.

**SC** – Are all the birds eaten?

**SH** – All the birds are eaten – we wouldn't do it otherwise. It is all for our own consumption.

**PG** – Often wildfowlers spend lots of time on the estuary with minimal pay off in terms of shooting the fowl – often just enjoying the estuary.

**SC** – Do you have a voluntary agreement with the local authority?

**SH** – Involved in creation of nature reserve – actively involved. We still adhere to rules put in place that say not to take watercraft into the LNR.

**PG** – Clean ups – we carry out regular major clean ups, for example in Exmouth, Exeter, we are keen to give back to the estuary.

**SH** – We divide the estuary up into 3-4 sections and rotate each year.

**SC** – Eales Dock have a right of access – they will be helping to promote the zones and sign a voluntary agreement. Would that be useful for you?

**MG** – We draw up a very comprehensive management plan.

**SC** – So you feel you have got everything covered?

**MG** – Yes. We have a general agreement and formalised lease agreements (club rules, etc.). Lease renewal for DWCA every 10 years, reviewed after 5.

**SC** – How are Natural England involved?

**MG** – Joint Tidal Group (JTG) – land owner (in this case Crown Estate), BASC and representative from statutory authorities – meet regularly for lease agreements.

**SC** – Once we have received feedback from all users I will produce a report which includes the final proposals – this will be taken to the SEDHRP officers working group who will then agree or disagree, if they agree this will be taken to Executive Committee for formal agreement. The zones should be in place for September.

**MG** – Evidence on disturbance – PHD and formalised lease agreements and management plan.

**SH** – We understand what you are trying to do and support it. Would be willing to advertise.

**SC** – Would you like wildfowling promoted in the Exe Press? This might help to clarify the role of the association.

**PG** – Would be happy with that and potentially write a paragraph or draft something for the information panel at the bird screen.

Site visit to DWCA-owned site at Exminster followed, where management and conservation methods were demonstrated.

## **Further Action**

- DWCA offered to act as voluntary wardens, helping to hand out codes of conduct, raising awareness about sensitivities of area, completing surveys, etc.
- SC to send standard surveys to DWCA and printed codes of conduct to hand out.
- SC to look into having sign to raise awareness about wildfowling activity at Exmouth bird screen, DWCA to work with EEMP on wording and look into providing contribution towards this.
- DWCA to provide article about their activity in a future edition of Exe Press newsletter.
- SC to send information to DWCA about how to get involved with Spirit of the Exe festival (David Littlefield).
- SC to look into Poole Harbour Disturbance Study.
- MG to keep SC updated about PhD disturbance study, which may take place on Exe.
- SH: DWCA happy to take SC, RG and others out on site to learn more about what they do.

## **Summary of Proposed Suggestions from Wildfowlers Meeting**

- Wildfowlers continue to use areas on the Exe, as agreed through consent with relevant authorities.
- Agreement from DWCA to act as voluntary wardens, helping to hand out codes of conduct, raising awareness about sensitivities of area, completing surveys, etc.
- SC to raise awareness about why certain activities have consent to continue.