



Giving Nature a hand: Natura 2000 species and habitats

It's easy to forget that you don't have to travel to remote corners of the Earth to witness spectacular wildlife. We have it on our doorstep, within our reach. Recently my family and I strolled around Glannau Ynys Gybi, or Holy Island Coast. A stretch of rugged coastline along the north western tip of Ynys Mon, this is a special place, a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for vegetated sea cliffs and dry heath, and a Special Protection Area (SPA) for that iconic Welsh bird the chough, which we saw wheeling along the coast.

The European Habitats and Birds Directives offer high level protection, termed Natura 2000, to Europe's most threatened biodiversity in a network of sites that spans the continent. Throughout the uplands, woodlands, freshwater and marine habitats of Wales there are 92 SACs and 20 SPAs covering around 700,000ha. We have a big responsibility to look after them and to get it right. Unfortunately around 60% of designated habitats and species features are in unfavourable condition, so if we want these areas to continue to act as the cornerstone of conservation in Wales, now is the time to prioritise our efforts and consider new approaches and funding sources.

The LIFE Natura 2000 Programme, which is led by Natural Resources Wales and co-funded by the EU's LIFE + Nature scheme, is working with organisations across the country to produce a strategic plan for the management and restoration of Natura 2000 sites over the next decade. The challenge

is to bring protected habitats and species into favourable condition. The Programme will identify all actions required up to 2020 and beyond, and establish strategic priorities, costs and potential funding sources.

The project team have completed an analysis of current issues and potential risks that face Natura 2000 species and habitats. Results show that the five most frequently occurring issues identified across Wales are: water pollution, inappropriate grazing (too much or too little), air pollution, changes in water management, and invasive species.

Of course, as you look at a more detailed level (individual features, groups of features, or ecosystems) other issues come to the fore, such as the impact of recreational activities, marine litter, coastal flood defence and erosion control (including coastal squeeze).

An essential part of this process is consultation with representatives of organisations with an active interest in managing or using Natura 2000 sites. In a series of workshops held across Wales in June, 77 delegates contributed invaluable expertise and opinion.

The LIFE Natura 2000 team analysed a long list of management mechanisms available to address issues and risks. These included direct management, byelaws, discharge consents, management agreements, regulating orders for fisheries, and agri-environment schemes. The success of these mechanisms depends upon the support of landowners and other

users, and the availability of resources to implement them. The full results are published on the project web pages.

Over the coming year the Programme will be producing costed and prioritised Action Plans for every Natura 2000 site in Wales, as well as for cross-cutting themes such as air pollution or climate change. We will also be investigating new ways to facilitate and fund essential work, and identifying where work on Natura 2000 can bring co-incident socio-economic benefits and ecosystems services.

The Programme will be complete by the end of 2014, and by then the difficult part will have begun – implementing the plans. This can only be achieved through the sign-up, support and commitment of relevant stakeholder organisations in the public, private and voluntary sectors.

Safeguarding and, where required, restoring habitats and species of Natura 2000 sites matters for the wildlife which depends on these sites, and for people. Anyone who has been fortunate enough to watch otters fishing, experienced the remoteness of an upland blanket bog, listened to the whoops of echo-locating lesser horseshoe bats, or watched a pod of bottlenosed dolphins will understand why.

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