



Wildlife and Countryside Link briefing Waterbirds and seabirds Charting Progress 2: The State of UK Seas June 2011

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) brings together over 30 of the UK's leading voluntary organisations united by their common interest in the conservation and enjoyment of wildlife, the countryside and the marine environment. Taken together our members have the support of over 8 million people in the UK.

These briefings are supported by the following organisations:

- Buglife – The Invertebrate Conservation Trust
- The Mammal Society
- Marine Conservation Society
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
- Shark Trust
- The Wildlife Trusts
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- WWF - UK

Overview

The Charting Progress 2 Report (CP2) is the result of a structured and co-ordinated approach to the second assessment of the status of UK seas. Published in July 2010, five years after the first assessment, it aims to illustrate the changes since 2005 and the advances made towards the UK vision of “*clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse oceans and seas*”. It consists of the main CP2 Report (which is also available in an online format), and two summary documents; an eight page CP2 Overview and a 16 page Government's Commentary on CP2; and is based on four supporting technical “Feeder Reports” covering:

- Healthy and Biologically Diverse Seas
- Clean and Safe Seas
- Ocean Processes
- Productive Seas

CP2 was prepared by the UK Marine Monitoring and Assessment Strategy community, which was established in response to the first Charting Progress Report. The assessment is structured around 11 regional seas covering all UK waters, some of which were subsequently merged to create the eight UK marine regions assessed.



The intention is that CP2 will be used to inform policy decisions on the future management of the UK's seas. It is also expected to form the foundation of the initial assessment required by the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive, which is due in 2012, and is already informing the evidence base for marine planning in England.

In light of the importance of CP2 for future decision-making on the management of UK seas, Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is concerned that the current status of UK seas is accurately recorded, wherever that information is summarised. In a number of specific places, we are aware that the summarised information on CP2 does not accurately reflect the information in the CP2 report or the Feeder Reports.

Consequently, Link has produced this briefing on waterbirds and seabirds to compare the findings and messages of the Healthy and Biologically Diverse Seas Feeder Report, with those used in the CP2 Report, the Overview and Government commentary.

In addition, Link has produced a further three separate briefings covering:

- Cetaceans
- Deepwater fish, sharks, rays, skates and diadromous fish
- Marine benthic habitats

If you would like to receive a copy of any of these briefings, please contact Fiona Llewellyn at Link (fiona@wcl.org.uk or 02079208600).

Wildlife and Countryside Link Briefing: Charting Progress 2 - Waterbirds and seabirds

The UK's coastal and marine environment supports internationally important numbers of birds with more than 100 species regularly using marine areas in the UK for feeding, loafing, roosting, moulting, and terrestrial sites for breeding. The CP2 assessment is divided into waterbirds which frequent coastal wetlands, estuaries and nearshore waters, and seabirds which spend much of their lives in nearshore and offshore waters, returning to land to nest.

The CP2 Report recognises that many waterbird and seabird populations have increased in size over the past century since the mid-1970s. However, it and the Government's Commentary fail to include the information from the Feeder Report, attributing this increase to the introduction of greater protection from hunting and persecution in the UK and overseas, enabling recovery of populations from historically low numbers. Since the mid-1990s declines are evident in a number of populations of wintering waterbirds and breeding seabirds, suggesting that external pressures are once again influencing marine bird populations. Climate change, habitat loss and changes in food availability are cited as the chief causes.

The CP2 Report recognises that the marine bird assessment is necessarily limited by the available data, especially in the effects of many of the pressures they are subjected to. However, this point does not come across in the summarised conclusions.

In light of these findings, Link is of the opinion that the overall summarised message on the current condition and status of waterbird and seabird populations is misleading, with recovery from historic lows presented as

increases and the recent declines in many populations underplayed. In addition, the likely existing and future impact of climate change is not given sufficient profile in the summaries.

Seabirds

The CP2 Report concludes that although there was a significant increase in breeding seabirds from the late 1960s to the end of the 1990s (4.5 million to 7 million), since Charting Progress 1 (2005) the number has declined by around 9%. This is somewhat misleading as the decline has actually taken place over the past decade. It should also be made clear that 9% is not trivial – representing as it does over 600,000 breeding seabirds. Only Northern gannet and great skua have sustained a positive trend since 1969 when comprehensive monitoring started, while herring gull and roseate tern numbers have declined in the same period by more than 50%. The mean breeding success of 21 seabird species was at its lowest levels since the mid-1980s in 2004, 2005 and 2007, with the species most acutely affected including black-legged kittiwakes and common guillemots, but also Atlantic puffins, razorbills and Northern fulmars.

The Feeder Report recognises that of seven species of seabirds which have declined between 2000 and 2008, numbers are down by:

- 33% for European shag
- 14% for Arctic skua
- 69% for herring gull, and
- 40% for black-legged kittiwake

As seabirds do not breed until they are three to nine years old, it is anticipated that the breeding numbers of those species experiencing difficulties now are more likely

to decline than stay stable. This important assessment is not conveyed in the summaries.

The CP2 Overview regional summary species assessment shows three regions with deteriorating seabird populations, one region with stable seabird populations, and three regions with increasing seabird populations. Yet the Feeder Report pressure assessment concludes that there is only one region where seabird populations appear to be increasing, three regions which can be considered stable and three regions experiencing declines greater than 10%. Obviously the CP2 Overview is plainly wrong in this case.

Waterbirds

The CP2 assessment showed that for 32 out of 57 species which winter or migrate through UK marine areas, numbers doubled between the mid-1970s and mid-1990s, but since then many have declined. As with seabirds, this increase is in fact recovery from historic lows resulting from hunting and persecution. Some species of diving duck and estuarine wader declined dramatically in 2006/07 when compared with 1975/76, resulting in:

- 54% fewer dunlin
- 43% fewer goldeneye, and
- 28% fewer bar-tailed godwit

Similar declines have been seen both within and outside of protected areas. The five most significant pressures are identified as climate change, contamination by hazardous substances, removal of species (target and non-target), habitat damage and habitat loss.

The Feeder Report recognises that the numbers of waterbirds wintering or migrating through marine areas increased between the mid-1970s and mid-1990s, but that numbers have declined “*slightly*” since then. While the trends are similar for most species, i.e. the

mean abundance remains 85% higher than in 1975/76, the increase in abundance masks serious declines in some diving species and estuarine waders.

The Feeder Report concludes that trends for wintering numbers of three wildfowl and six waders have been in decline since at least the early 1990s with mallard and dunlin at their lowest numbers since 1975/76. Numbers of a further eight species have declined since the late 1990s with pochard, goldeneye and red-breasted merganser all at their lowest numbers since 1975/76.

Only 37.5% of waterbirds assessed remain stable or have increased since the late 1990s and the trend for more than half of the waterbirds assessed over the past decade is downward.

There appears to be a serious discrepancy between the Feeder Report regional pressure assessments and the CP2 Overview regional summary species assessments. It is clear that these two assessments are not actually showing the same thing, but it is not clear how the assessment for waterbirds (or seabirds) shown in the CP2 Overview was reached. This assessment is not summarised in the CP2 Report or the Feeder Report and appears to be inaccurate; it shows that there is improvement in waterbird populations in all five regions included in the summary, with few or no problems experienced in four of the five regions and some problems in the other region. This is at odds with the material presented in the CP2 Report and the Feeder Report.

Conclusions

The tone of the Government’s Commentary is misleading. It focuses on the fact that most seabird and waterbird populations have increased in the latter half of the 20th century, but fails to attribute this to recovery from

historic lows. Moreover, in the past decade, which is presumably the most critical time in terms of implementation of Government policies to protect the environment and wildlife, the trend has reversed with 56% of marine bird populations assessed now exhibiting declines and only 44% remaining stable or increasing. This suggests that although much was done to improve protection of waterbirds and seabirds some time ago to deal with historic pressures such as hunting, insufficient action is being taken now, as new threats have come to the fore.

Link is concerned that the CP2 summary documents fail to reflect findings of the Feeder Report and subsequently, the urgent need for further action to provide adequate protection for waterbirds and seabirds and improve the management of activities which have a direct impact on them will not be addressed now or in the future.