

SOMERSET LEVELS AND MOORS WATER LEVEL MANAGEMENT AND NATURE CONSERVATION STRATEGY SUMMARY



National Rivers Authority
Information Centre
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NRA

National Rivers Authority

South Western Region

INTRODUCTION

On 1 September 1989, the Water Act established the National Rivers Authority (NRA) as a public body whose main tasks are to protect and enhance the water environment in England and Wales, and to provide appropriate protection against damaging flooding from rivers and the sea.

MISSION STATEMENT (PART)

The NRA will protect and improve the water environment. This will be achieved through effective management of water resources and by substantial reductions in pollution. The Authority aims to provide effective defence for people and property against flooding from rivers and the sea. In discharging its duties it will operate openly and balance the interests of all who benefit from and use rivers, groundwaters, estuaries and coastal waters.

THE NRA AND NATURE CONSERVATION

As early as 1973, water and drainage authorities were obliged to have regard to the preservation of natural beauty and the conservation of flora and fauna during the course of their work. This duty also covered geology, archaeology, access and amenity (Water Act, 1973 Part ii Section 22). The conservation duty has been strengthened by subsequent legislation. Today, the 1991 Water Resources Act (Section 16(1)) confers a duty to further the conservation of natural beauty, flora and fauna. Section 12 (1) of the Land Drainage Act 1991 confers the same duty on Internal Drainage Boards (IDBs) and covers all aspects of their work. The NRA has an additional duty to promote nature conservation and recreation in the aquatic environment. The NRA has a firm commitment to nature conservation and the past decade has seen an approach to maintain, rather than lower water tables within the Somerset Levels and Moors. In this context the Authority is responsible for pumping stations and all major watercourses within the area; smaller watercourses are maintained by the relevant IDB using their statutory powers. In order to maintain the present drainage system close co-operation exists between the NRA and IDBs.

THE SPECIAL INTEREST OF THE SOMERSET LEVELS AND MOORS

The Somerset Levels and Moors are recognised as an internationally important wetland of exceptional wildlife, landscape and archaeological interest. The area contains 12 major wet grassland Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) covering a total of approximately 7,200ha. English Nature has identified that the Levels and Moors meet the criteria of international importance qualifying for protection under two designations:

The Ramsar Convention to protect wetlands and the European Community Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds (Directive 79/409).

RECENT PROBLEMS

With the post-war drive to maximise food production came drainage schemes of increased efficiency. Drier conditions have thus become more prevalent on the Somerset Levels and Moors allowing more intensive systems of agriculture to be used. The effects of these changes have reflected on wildlife within the area. The most important areas for wildlife are the Sites of Special Scientific Interest where records show that there has been a dramatic decline in the number of breeding waders over the past 10-15 years. In certain areas some species of wading birds, which were once relatively common, no longer nest. Other aspects are giving cause for concern; in particular the average numbers of wintering birds have decreased while the botanical interest of some areas is undergoing a rapid change. Concern has also been expressed that the drying-out process will damage sites of archaeological interest. In recognition of these problems the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food introduced an Environmentally Sensitive Area scheme covering the Somerset Levels and Moors in 1987. This offers farmers management agreements to follow traditional farming practices.

THE WATER LEVEL MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

Although trials in three areas (Southlake, Wetmoor and West Sedgemoor) have been underway since 1988 to assess the effects of raising water levels, and although the ESA has had a favourable impact, the threat to nature conservation in the Levels and Moors continues to cause concern, prompting the NRA to take further action.

In 1990, the Somerset Local Flood Defence Committee appointed a Sub-Committee to review the problems and to recommend a Strategy for water level management on the Somerset Levels and Moors. After research and consultation with all interested parties a twelve point Strategy has been developed (see below). This Strategy recognises the wildlife importance of the Levels and Moors and the NRA's own key role in water management.

AIM OF THE STRATEGY

The aim of the Water Level Management Strategy is to safeguard the special wetland interest of the Somerset Levels and Moors. The approach will need to be innovative and the NRA will pay special attention to the objectives of the ESA scheme, SSSIs and other environmental designations.

A primary target is to provide core areas where shallow winter flooding will create feeding sites for wintering waterfowl and soft ground for wading birds to breed in Spring and early Summer.

English Nature has identified a list of SSSIs for primary attention. These are:

- Catcott, Edington and Chilton Moors
- Kings Sedgemoor
- Moorlynch
- Northmoor
- Southlake Moor
- Tealham and Tadhams Moors
- West Sedgemoor
- Wet Moor

The success of the Strategy will depend on careful management and monitoring of sites and co-ordinated action by many different individuals and organisations including in particular the occupiers of the land. The NRA believes that the Strategy presents an important opportunity to safeguard the special character of the Somerset Levels and Moors and the wildlife they support.

THE SOMERSET LEVELS AND MOORS WATER LEVEL MANAGEMENT AND NATURE CONSERVATION POLICY SUMMARY

Following detailed consultation the National Rivers Authority has adopted the following Strategy:

- 1 The National Rivers Authority recognises the outstanding nature conservation interest of the Somerset Levels and Moors and that this is in decline.
- 2 The Authority seeks to restore and maintain the wildlife and landscape of this internationally important wetland, consistent with its given duties, and to conserve the archaeological interest.
- 3 The Authority has statutory obligations as regards water management, including the control of water abstraction, discharges, water quality, drainage and water levels.
- 4 The Authority will give special consideration to the environmental impact of abstraction and discharges throughout the Levels and Moors.
- 5 The Authority will review its flood defence practices and take into account the requirements for nature conservation, to ensure sympathetic management within the Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA). Formal management plans will be agreed with English Nature (EN) over activities which affect Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). English Heritage will be consulted over matters that affect Scheduled Ancient Monuments (SAMs).
- 6 The Authority will adopt a presumption in favour of positive water level management for nature conservation on SSSIs, and in other appropriate areas where there is general agreement. Priority will be given to the core areas of SSSIs.
- 7 Where raised water levels affect agricultural productivity the Authority will support the introduction of a water level premium on ESA payments and/or Section 15 management agreements with English Nature to offset these costs.
- 8 The Authority will liaise with relevant organisations to draw up a list of priority sites where enhanced water levels are required to maintain and restore the nature conservation interest.
- 9 The Authority will take action after consultation with the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food, English Nature, Internal Drainage Boards and landowners in order to achieve the conservation objectives.
- 10 The importance of the 'withy' growing industry is fully recognised and in implementing its Strategy the NRA will seek to accommodate its special requirements.
- 11 In implementing the Strategy the Authority will take special account of the statutory, practical and financial position of Internal Drainage Boards.
- 12 Any changes in strategy must ensure that there is no increase in flood risk to human life, habitation or communications.

NRA

- Environmentally sensitive areas
- Sites of Special Scientific Interest
- 1 Catcott, Edington and Chilton Moors
- 2 Kings Sedgemoor
- 3 Langmead and Weston Level
- 4 Meare Heath
- 5 Moorlynch
- 6 Northmoor
- 7 Shapwick Heath
- 8 Street Heath
- 9 Southlake Moor
- 10 Tealham and Tadham Moors
- 11 Westhay Heath
- 12 Westhay Moor
- 13 West Moor
- 14 West Sedgemoor
- 15 Wet Moor



The NRA and the Environment Agency

The NRA will form the major part of a new organisation which will have responsibilities not only for the environmental protection of water, but also of land and air. The new Environment Agency starts its work of managing the environment in England and Wales on April 1 1996

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Telephone the emergency hotline to report all environmental incidents, such as pollution, poaching and flooding, or any signs of damage or danger to our rivers, lakes and coastal waters. Your prompt action will help the NRA to protect water, wildlife, people and property.

NRA emergency hotline
0800 80 70 60
24 hour free emergency telephone line



ENVIRONMENT AGENCY



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ENGLISH NATURE

English Nature (The Nature Conservancy Council for England) is the statutory advisor to Government on nature conservation in England and promotes the conservation of England's wildlife and nature features. Through the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, English Nature works with sister organisations in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland on UK and international conservation issues.

English Nature
South West Regional Office
Roughmoor, Bishops Hull
Taunton TA1 5AA
Tel: (01823) 283211

MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE FISHERIES AND FOOD

MAFF through the Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme offers farmers payments to adopt farming methods aimed at protecting the landscape, wildlife and archaeology of the Somerset Levels and Moors. MAFF also provides financial assistance towards the costs of flood defence and coastal protection.

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