

Moray Firth Special Area of Conservation Management Group Meeting Minutes

Location:	Via Microsoft Teams
Date:	2 February 2022
Time:	10am – 12.30pm
Attendees:	Members Ben Leyshon, NatureScot (BL) - Chair David Patterson, NatureScot (DP) Doreen Bell, Scottish Water, (DB) Andrew Goldie, Port of Cromarty Firth (AG) Hannah Haywood, Police Scotland (HH) Keith Beaton, SEPA (KB) Secretariat Natalie Palmer, Moray Firth Coastal Partnership, MFCP (NP)

Welcome

Apologies

Ken McLean, Port of Inverness (KM)
Daniel Sutherland, Police Scotland (DS)

Introductions

Members:

Ben Leyshon, NatureScot (BL) - Chair
David Patterson, NatureScot (DP)
Doreen Bell, Scottish Water, (DB)
Andrew Goldie, Port of Cromarty Firth (AG)
Hannah Haywood, Police Scotland (HH)
Keith Beaton, SEPA (KB)

Secretariat:

Natalie Palmer, Moray Firth Coastal Partnership (NP)

Presenters:

Barbara Cheney, University of Aberdeen (BC)
Sarah Taylor MacDonald, Chanonry Point Action Group (STM)

Presentations

Chanonry Point Action Group Update Presentation – Sarah Taylor MacDonald

Sarah described issues with increased visitor management at Chanonry point. These were both land-based (relating to traffic congestion, litter, and disturbance) and sea-based (relating to increased water-based recreation from kayaks, paddleboards and small vessels).

Data on visitor presence and behaviour at Chanonry has been logged by the Action Group. They have been working closely with volunteers from Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC) and the local community. The Action Group has also been working with Heriot Watt University in gathering data on vessel activity and dolphin behaviour.

Data on vessel numbers and dolphin behaviour during lockdown was also recorded and this suggested that dolphin presence and foraging at the Point was greater during lockdown.

As far as the SAC Management Group is concerned, the potential short and longer term impacts of disturbance to dolphins from recreational users was of particular concern. This could result in short term behavioural changes but if these occur repeatedly and over a period of time then this could result in longer terms impacts and impacts on the wider population.

The difficulty in addressing disturbance was discussed at length. The legislation has a role to play but ultimately education to inform and change irresponsible behaviour whilst on the water is needed. The idea of a marine ranger to help was considered to be a good idea.

Marine Scotland's Jayne Burns has taken over the disturbance portfolio and would be a useful contact point for the Management Group.

Action Point: NP to make contact with Jayne Burns to find out what her role is and following discussion with the Management Group to invite her to attend future meetings of the Group.

Lighthouse Field Station bottlenose dolphin research plans – Barbara Cheney (University of Aberdeen)

The University of Aberdeen suggested setting up a meeting for stakeholders to discuss their research work in the autumn. In the meantime, her presentation provided a quick summary of the some of their areas of study.

The abundance of bottlenose dolphin population is around 224. The number using the SAC has remained stable but is expanding down the East coast. Survival appears to be stable. Reproduction is showing an increasing trend.

Passive Acoustic Monitoring has been carried out which helps to shed light about how the dolphins navigate and forage. Hydrophones placed across the inner Moray Firth also provide useful data on dolphin distribution, presence and absence.

Data was collected during the lockdown period using Automatic Identification System (AIS) data and acoustic devices at Chanonry and the Sutors. During lockdown, dolphins appeared to spend longer at Chanonry. It was difficult to determine patterns at the Sutors because dolphin vocalisations were screened out by noise from an oil rig in the area at the same time. During lockdown the length of whistles were shorter when fewer boats around. The significance of these changes for overall dolphin health unknown.

Minutes

- **Approval of last minutes**

Approved.

No matters arising.

- **Handover of Chair**

Chair of group handed from Nathan McLaughlan to Ben Leyshon

- **MFSAC Management Group (MFSACMG) - Future Focus**

The role of the Management Group was to form and then prepare a management scheme for the SAC. This was a requirement of the Habitats Regulations which state that for marine SAC's with complex or multiple issues/activities then the relevant authorities (statutory and public bodies) should form a group and set up a scheme of management. The legislation does not require the management group to continue after the management scheme has been developed. There is therefore no obligation for the group to continue indefinitely.

We acknowledge that the management scheme is out of date and needs a refresh. We considered a traffic light system would be helpful to go through the scheme highlighting what is outdated, what has been achieved, and what the future focus should be. An initial review could be carried out by the MFCP, and this could then be considered by the Management Group at their next meeting.

Future roles for the group were discussed. These included:

- A forum
 - updating partners on our current work
 - act as a sounding board to discuss issues, activities, development proposals

It was agreed that the group provides a useful platform for sharing current work delivery, a forum to test ideas, and also the opportunity to informally discuss development proposals.

- Lead on specific projects where there is a gap

The MFSACMG could identify areas of work where others are not currently taking or well placed to lead, or where a more strategic or co-ordinated approach would be helpful eg visitor management or how the SAC contributes to meeting the climate and biodiversity challenges.

Updating the management scheme would help to identify where these gaps are and how to address them.

- Share best practice

What's happening elsewhere in Scotland, the UK, overseas? Can we learn from elsewhere?

The Group offers an opportunity to share best practice among the membership but also to learn from other groups, such as Cardigan Bay in Wales. The Cardigan Bay group could be asked to present at a future MFSACMG meeting.

There is a wider question about how academic research can improve the management of the area. How can science inform management? Can we anticipate future needs and predict what data would help to understand and management those needs? Can we anticipate the questions we will need to address now and carry out research in advance to avoid delays?

- **Moving forward**

Need to decide what we want to do as a Group. What are our priorities? Then we can decide who needs to be involved and what structures we need. The Highland Council and Marine Scotland should be approached to attend the Group now. In the future other key authorities include BEIS (Dept of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy) and the CEC should also be approached to re-join the Group.

How do we relate to other initiatives/MG's and engage with others for example:

- Understand how Cardigan Bay SAC in Wales manages the site which will be addressing similar challenges and opportunities. AP NP to contact the Cardigan Bay group and invite them give a presentation at our next meeting.
- Other partnerships and groups
 - Opportunity Cromarty Firth
 - Marine Planning Partnership

We agreed that the Forum role of the Management Group was useful to maintain and that reviewing the management scheme would identify priorities for future work. Once this has been done then we can take stock of priorities and decide the structures and members needed to deliver the work. In the meantime, the SAC Management Group exists as a partnership to discuss and act on issues as they arise, and, as required.

- **Members Updates**

Scottish Water

- Allanfearn Wastewater Treatment Works (WWTW) and Longman WW Pumping Station (PS) will revert to Scottish Water from Private Finance Initiative (PFI) Catchment, effective 29/5/22. Licence transfers have already issued by SEPA.
- Ardersier – work continues on commissioning of plant.
- Whiteness change of owners and strategic direction, foul sewer connection to Ardersier WWTW already in place and capacity available at WWTW.
- Nairn - this news is 2 years old but is still relevant, through extensive studies a number of sewer misconnections (foul sewage connected to surface water) were identified and resolved, particularly in Achareidh. This work will help to protect Bathing Water quality in the SAC for benefit of Bottle-nosed dolphins.
- Cromarty – Scottish Water are in the early stages of looking at replacement of the WWTW, marine modelling undertaken to understand potential impacts at

statistically significant dolphin hotspots and Cromarty Bay SPA. SEPA have provided feedback on the model (Keith Beaton).

- Rosemarkie – gabion protection work (replacement due to repeat storm damage) being carried out adjacent to Golf Course to protect WWTW outfall.
- Participation in Marine Litter Strategy Steering Group and preparation of response to the current consultation ongoing.
- Scottish Water has prepared an Urban Waters Routemap to sit alongside the 3rd cycle of River Basin Management Planning (RBMP) in Scotland.
 - We have set out in this route map how we will:
 - Improve water quality (to support Scotland’s RBMP objectives).
 - Increase monitoring and reporting to cover all combined sewer overflows (CSOs) that discharge into the highest priority2 waters.
 - Significantly reduce sewer related debris in the environment, and
 - Reduce spills from the sewer network

The routemap can be found here:-

[Urban Waters Improvements - Scottish Water](#)

SEPA

- Still recovering from the cyber-attack of 2020.
- Working on oil and gas decommissioning projects – ensuring compliance and mitigating pollution issues. Following a ‘one planet prosperity’ model.

Port of Cromarty Firth

- Nine signs have been erected around the Cromarty Firth area to warn people of the dangers of swimming between Nigg and Cromarty.
- The two Scottish green ports will be announced in the next few weeks. The Port of Cromarty Firth have put themselves forward. There are eight other applications. If successful, this would mean a massive boost for the area in terms of highly skilled jobs.
- The cruise liner season is due to begin in April.

Police Scotland

- There has been an increase in reported cases of wildlife disturbance during the pandemic (when UK travel restrictions eased). However, no prosecutions. It is difficult to define what constitutes a disturbance. There have been varying court decisions, therefore there is no definitive precedent.
- Police Scotland have arranged for 100 die cast aluminium boards to replace hard foam education boards (covering responsible wildlife interaction practices).

- Daniel Sutherland is going to try to arrange a Police Scotland drone training session in the Chanonry Point area this summer to monitor the movement of dolphins and other activities (recreational in particular).
- Police Scotland are also keen to work with partnership groups on the issue of wildlife disturbance in the Moray Firth. This includes interactions with WDC, Chanonry Point Action Group and Moray Firth Coastal Partnership.

NatureScot

Moray Firth Conservation Management Advice for Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and Special Protection Areas (SPA) have now been prepared. These documents set out why the area is important, what the wider socio-economic benefits of the designations, the legislative/policy context, the feature sensitivities and the conservation measures and advice.

The Crown Estates Commission (CEC) announced the successful bidders for the offshore wind round on 16th January. NS will recruit 9.5 new staff to develop new guidance and input into key aspects of research. NS are reviewing the implications for resourcing across their teams to support this work

Funding – there are two new funding schemes available. These are:

- Nature Restoration Fund
 - Expressions of Interest are invited from projects seeking capital funding in the range £25,000 - £250,000
 - A Competitive Fund for projects requesting a grant of over £250,000 will be launched later in 2022 with full details to follow.
 - Includes:
 - Habitat and species restoration – management for enhancement and connectivity
 - Freshwater restoration, including restoring natural flows in rural catchments
 - Coastal and marine management to promote restoration and resilience
 - Control of invasive non-native species impacting on nature
 - SMEEF (Scottish Marine Environmental Enhancement Fund)

The Fund will accept voluntary donations from users of the marine environment such as shipping, aquaculture, fisheries, renewable energy, oil and gas, and use it to create a grant pot for projects which enhance the natural capital these sectors rely on.

MFCP

MFCP are working on a range of projects.

- Preparing a main issues document for the Moray Firth and assessing the 'readiness' and 'appetite' for MFCP to transition to become a Regional Marine Planning Partnership, and establishing a forum to discuss these issues
- The State of the East Coast Review (Seacor) – the project will bring together a wide range of coastal data currently held in the area, by individuals, statutory and non-statutory organisations and community groups in a co-ordinated website.
- A biosecurity compilation document for the Moray Firth – compilation of River Trusts, Ports and Harbours and community group work.
- Involved with a bid with Plymouth Marine Laboratory and the University of Aberdeen on a valuing biodiversity project (applying for Natural Environment Research Council funding for a three-year research project).
- In the process of hiring a coastal officer to cover the Nairn to Wick area. This two-year post is funded through the Highland Coastal Communities Strategic Fund, administered by the Highland Council. The post holder will be responsible for delivering the 'Our Firth, Our Seashore' project, which is a marine education and beach cleaning initiative. Part of the educational side of the project will be supporting the WDC 'Rude to Intrude' campaign - <https://uk.whales.org/tag/rude-to-intrude/>, which has a focus on avoiding wildlife disturbances and education around this issue. The coastal officer could partner with the MFSACMG, WDC, Chanonry Point Action Group and Police Scotland on addressing some of the visitor management issues highlighted at today's meeting.

- **Any other business**

Enforcement powers for environmental infringements could include fines that could pay for environmental improvements. A means to benefit the wider environment. Something also worth investigating.

- **Date of next meeting and Chairperson**

End August/Beginning September 2022

Ben Leyshon

Actions (21 February 2022):

Task:	Allocated to:	Timeframe:	Incomplete/Partially Complete/Completed:
General review of management scheme to determine what updates required	NP and BL	April 2022	Incomplete – brainstorm (MFCP and NatureScot) on April 19
Contact The Highland Council and Marine Scotland to ask if they would like to re-join the Management Group	NP	August/September 2022	Partially complete – contacted Jayne Burns (Marine Scotland) via email on 7 Feb 2022 Awaiting appointment of marine planner at THC
Contact other groups that would be able to share ideas and information such as Cardigan Bay SAC and WDC – may be able to present at a future MFSACMG meeting	NP	August/September 2022	Partially complete – have completed an online form on the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales website requesting a contact for the group
Set up next meeting	NP	August/September 2022	Incomplete – will send out a Doodlepoll closer to the time