

North West Wetlands Network

December 2005



Meathop Moss Nature Reserve, Cumbria Wildlife Trust

The Vision

To use and improve the ecological resources of the North West's existing and potential wetlands to realise economic and environmental benefits and promote an attractive image of the region

Unrecognised Assets

This project was borne out of a recognition that although a small number of individual wetlands are important wildlife assets for the North West, the region has a large and relatively unknown network of wetlands and the potential for the creation of many more. Examples across the country indicate that wetlands, as well as being of great importance to wildlife, can deliver significant socio-economic and image benefits. This study has investigated the thesis that this can be replicated in the North West.

The region's freshwater wetland sites are already of significant environmental value, and include 2211ha of raised bog, 225ha of unimproved, semi-improved and marshy grassland, 179ha of reedswamp and 229ha of open water. The wildlife value of these sites is recognised by various designations, such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Ramsar.

A small proportion of these sites attract around 800,000 visitors, who generate a spend of approximately £6.4m in the region, and support 221 jobs (71 directly and 131 indirectly in the local economy). This study has looked at the feasibility of proposals for an expansion of wetland sites and facilities over the next ten years, in order to improve these benefits.

The study

Stage 1 Shortlisting 77 sites from an earlier study of wetlands¹ were selected following an initial analysis of ecology, socio-economic and technical issues. From this six core areas or 'networks' were identified – North and West Cumbria, Cumbrian Lakes and Rivers, South Lakes Coast, East Morecambe Bay, West Lancashire Plain and the Mersey Corridor.

A shortlisting analysis was undertaken to identify those sites with the highest potential to be 'key sites'. These key sites would form the focus for visitors (with car parks, visitor centre, toilets, café, etc.), within a wider network of other 'lower key sites' with fewer visitor facilities. The principle of the networks would be that visitors would be first attracted to the key or 'honeypot' site and from there would be directed to the other network sites.

The following sites were shortlisted:

North and West Cumbria:

Key site – Bowness Common
Network sites – Wedholme Flow, Glasson Moss, Drumburgh Moss

South Lakes Coast:

Key site – Foulshaw Moss
Network sites – Lyth Valley, Meathop Moss, Roudsea and Ellerside Mosses

East Morecambe Bay:

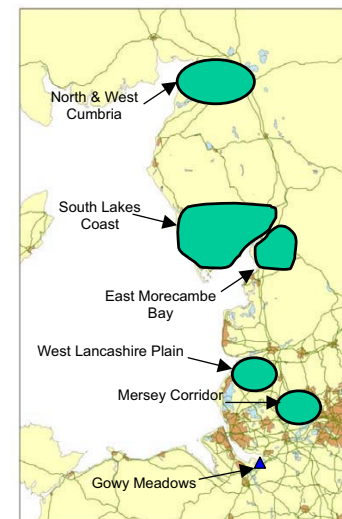
Key site – Leighton Moss
Network site – Silverdale Moss

West Lancashire Plain:

Key site – Martin Mere
Network sites – Mere Sands Wood, Nuck's Wood, Low Meadows and Croston and Mawdesley Mosses

Mersey Corridor:

Key sites – Wigan Flashes and Pennington Flash.
No Network sites



In addition Goway Meadows in Cheshire was taken forward into the feasibility study stage as a key site in the south of the region, although it does not fit logically into the networks identified.

¹Northern England Lowland Wetland Project. RSPB/Environment Agency/English Nature. June 2000



Leighton Moss nature reserve, RSPB

Stage 2 Feasibility Studies

The purpose of these studies was to develop a vision for each of the networks and to assess how this could be translated into proposals for the development of the network over the next ten years.

Feasibility was assessed in terms of technical deliverability, the capital and operational costs of proposals, and socio-economic benefits such as visitor numbers, site income and jobs created, together with additional indirect benefits to the region.

The analysis considered outline capital and revenue costs, comparing these to potential socio-economic and environmental benefits. It also identified potential funding sources and risks. Studies were undertaken for each of the sites.

The proposals and associated costs and benefits which were considered are generalised and will require further work to enable development into projects, which could be submitted to funding bodies. They are, however, comprehensive enough to allow comparison between the wetland projects.



Martin Mere visitor centre, Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust

Stage 3 Final Report The Final Report pulled together the findings from the individual feasibility studies. In summary it:

- summarised the overall costs of the proposals and compared these with the likely environmental and socio-economic benefits
- analysed the fit of the proposed developments against key strategies and policies
- provided an assessment of potential funding sources to ascertain the likelihood of obtaining external funding for the proposals
- assessed the value for money of the proposals in terms of costs of creating jobs, and
- suggested where the proposals could be amended to improve the resultant costs, benefits and strategic fit.

The report also outlined the basis of a marketing strategy and business plans, and set out a provisional 5-10 year development programme.



Geese flying over wet grass, Peter Wakely, English Nature

Main Findings

Environmental Benefits

Proposals for the wetlands would increase the areas of habitat, including 124ha of rehabilitated bog, 176ha of open water, 119ha of reedswamp and 52ha of marshy grassland. They will contribute significantly towards meeting the regional biodiversity action plan targets for lowland raised bog (13%), floodplain grazing marsh (46%) and reedbed (79%). The proposals would also contribute to a number of national BAP targets for protected species. Overall the proposed developments would have good environmental outcomes.



Little grebe/dabchick, Paul Glendell, English Nature

Socio Economic and Image Benefits

The project as a whole is found to align closely with a number sub-regional and local strategies concerned with the conservation of species and habitats, sustainability, the expansion of the tourism offer, economic growth, diversification of the rural economy, and public access improvements. It is also likely to provide environmental, health and educational benefits to the local area and the wider region

A projected increase in visitor numbers of 1.15m could generate an additional spend of £9.2m in the region and 145 new jobs (36 directly on the sites and 109 indirectly in the local economy) which is a significant employment outcome. The wetlands network would help improve the image of the North West and the study concludes that there is potential for some of the sites and networks to develop into regional tourism attractions.

In terms of socio-economic benefits, the project identified average costs for each wetland job created, this being £169,000 (although there are variations across the network). Value for money, in terms of total cost per job created, could be improved by seeking to reduce capital costs, for example by using volunteer labour to construct boardwalks, and by seeking management agreements under the Environmental Stewardship Scheme, rather than land purchase. Our initial results indicate an average reduction from £169,000 to £122,000 per job created may be achievable.



Mere Sands Wood Nature Reserve, Lancashire Wildlife Trust

What happens next?

- We plan to set up a North West Wetlands Network development group to oversee the programme, facilitate project development and develop a regional business and marketing plan and strategy. In the interim this role will be taken on by the North West Wetlands Network steering group.
- A marketing leaflet will be produced within the next twelve months. It is intended that this leaflet will be used to raise the profile of wetlands and how they can contribute to environmental, economic and image benefits to the region and to influence regional policy makers and potential funders.
- The steering group will review the recommendations of this study and take them forward as appropriate.

The North West Wetlands Network project is sponsored by the Northwest Regional Development Agency, the Environment Agency and English Nature. It is also supported by RSPB, Cheshire Wildlife Trust, Lancashire Wildlife Trust, Cumbria Wildlife Trust, the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust and Groundwork Wigan.

In addition a number of organisations, in particular Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council, Lancashire CC, Cheshire CC, Lake District National Park Authority, North West Regional Assembly, National Farmers Union, Rural Regeneration Cumbria, Lancashire & Blackpool Tourist Board, Rural Development Service and the North West Farm Tourism Initiative have also provided input to the project. The support and assistance of individuals from all these organisations is gratefully acknowledged.

A copy of the report can be obtained from <http://www.biodiversitynw.org.uk/>



Rostherne Mere National Nature Reserve, Peter Wakely, English Nature