

Nature Conservation in Europe: Approaches and Lessons

Annex UK.10. The Common Standards Monitoring Approach Used for ASSIs/SSSI's, SPAs and SACs in the UK

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The monitoring of the condition of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (Areas of Special Scientific Interest in Northern Ireland), Special Protection Areas, Special Areas of Conservation, and Ramsar sites is primarily carried out by the staff of the statutory nature conservation bodies. To enable this to be carried out cost-effectively and consistently, a streamlined standardised system has been established that assesses the condition of features in each site (or sub-unit) according to a Common Standards Monitoring framework (JNCC, 1998, 2019). This enables monitoring information from each protected site (and monitoring units within them) to be amalgamated to provide local, national and UK-wide assessments. Features within each unit/site are assessed as being in 'favourable condition' (that is, when their conservation objectives are being met), 'unfavourable condition', 'partially destroyed, or 'destroyed'. Features with an unfavourable condition are further described as 'recovering, 'declining' or showing 'no change' (although from 2019 this has become optional).

The condition of each feature is assessed against site-specific targets that are set for a small number of measurable attributes that define the condition of each habitat type, for example, in relation to physical attributes (e.g. water level), vegetation composition and structure; or species (e.g. population size and availability of suitable habitat). The attributes and targets describe the desired state of the feature, taking account of the sites' conservation objectives and generic guidance that has been produced by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee since 2003 for broad habitats and species groups (JNCC, 2003¹). The assessments use relatively simple, efficient and repeatable methods that can be carried out over one site visit; and they therefore tend to focus on biophysical and vegetation-related attributes. Direct assessments of species are carried out where data are available (e.g. from species monitoring schemes), but for most sites (especially in England) their condition is inferred from assessments of the species' habitat – which is a weakness in the system.

According to JNCC (1998, 2003) the assessments are supposed to be carried out at least every six-years for each feature in each monitoring unit of each site. However, due to funding cuts the frequency of site assessments has declined. For example, in 2018 in England nearly half (47%) of SSSIs had not been assessed in the previous six years².

References

- JNCC (1998) *A statement on common standards monitoring*. Peterborough, UK: Joint Nature Conservation Committee.
- JNCC (2003) *Common Standards Monitoring: Introduction to the Guidance Manual*. Peterborough, UK: Joint Nature Conservation Committee.
- JNCC (on behalf of the Common Standards Monitoring Inter-agency Working Group) (2019) *A Statement on Common Standards for Monitoring Protected Sites 2019*. JNCC, Peterborough, UK: Joint Nature Conservation Committee.

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¹ Up-dated guidance at <https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/common-standards-monitoring-guidance/>

² <https://unearthed.greenpeace.org/2018/09/07/half-england-sssi-sites-not-monitored/>