

DEFINING RAMSAR SITE PROTECTED FEATURES AND RAMSAR SITES WITH MARINE COMPONENTS

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1. Background

Ramsar sites are wetlands of international importance designated under the Ramsar Convention. Article 2.1 of the Convention states that:

“each Contracting Party shall designate suitable wetlands within its territory ... and they may incorporate ... coastal zones adjacent to the wetlands and islands or bodies of marine water deeper than six metres at low tide lying within the wetlands, especially where these have importance as waterfowl habitat.”

Designating authorities are guided by a set of criteria¹ covering wetland type (criterion 1), species and ecological communities (criteria 2-4), waterbirds (criteria 5-6), fish (criteria 7-8) and other taxa (criterion 9). A total of 148 Ramsar sites have been designated within the UK to date (excluding the overseas territories) covering inland and coastal wetlands. The majority of these are complementary to Special Protection Areas (SPAs) or some Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), which in turn are underpinned by Areas/Sites of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI/SSSIs). However the relationship between Ramsar sites and complementary designations can be complex, including differences in boundaries and features listed.

Under the UK Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 (Clause 123(4c)), the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010 (Clause 79(4d)) and the Marine Act (Northern Ireland) 2013 (Clause 20(c)), Ramsar sites will legally form part of the marine protected area (MPA) network where they are considered to protect marine features.

For the purposes of reporting under this legislation and assessing progress towards international and national obligations to establish MPA networks, it is necessary to set out a process for determining the contribution of Ramsar sites to the MPA network. Guidance has already been agreed by SNCBs on defining SACs and SPAs marine components² and ASSIs/SSSIs³ with marine biological components. These feature-based approaches preclude a coastal site from being considered ‘marine’ when protecting only terrestrial or freshwater features.

2. Purpose

This paper sets out the process for identifying Ramsar sites with marine components in a consistent manner so that a UK level list can be generated as part of the UK MPA stocktake. The intended outcome is that each Country Agency will be able to supply JNCC with a list of their Ramsar sites with marine components, the marine feature(s) considered to be afforded protection (as listed within the site documentation) and those UK MPA network feature(s) with which these listed features are considered to correlate.

¹ http://www.ramsar.org/sites/default/files/documents/library/ramsarsites_criteria_eng.pdf

² “Defining SACs with marine components and SPAs with marine components: JNCC and country conservation agency guidance” <https://hub.jncc.gov.uk/assets/2724254e-3d7d-46e5-be9d-612fc4ab1f70>

³ “Defining ASSI/SSSIs with ‘Marine Biological Components’ and setting out a process for determining their contribution to the UK MPA network” <https://hub.jncc.gov.uk/assets/2cde282c-2358-4d3f-9072-b1f4f4086545>

3. Defining protected features of Ramsar sites

Before marine components of Ramsar Sites can be identified, a first and potentially challenging step is to identify what features are explicitly listed as protected in Ramsar sites. Ramsar site designations (especially early designations) do not adopt a clear feature-based approach and site citations, where available, often do not explicitly list protected features. Contracting Parties are required to justify why sites meet the designation criteria in Ramsar Information Sheets (RIS) and to provide information on 'noteworthy' flora and fauna. Until recently there has not been firm guidance on what information these justifications should contain and the Ramsar Convention does not provide lists of candidate qualifying habitats or species.

In practice, a site's internationally important habitats and species are often named within the criteria justifications (RIS⁴ section 14) and nationally important flora and fauna are named under noteworthy flora and fauna (sections 21 and 22). Nevertheless, these habitats and species are primarily documented to justify the designation of the site as a whole, and not necessarily to explicitly notify them as protected features. A complete list of Ramsar site's protected features cannot be automatically obtained from the site documentation (either the site citations or the RIS). SNCBs will therefore need to apply a degree of interpretation to decide how protected features should be identified within their Ramsar sites. There is an opportunity to share knowledge and approaches where progress has already been made, for example Natural England presented principles for defining Ramsar site features in a paper at MPATG18⁵, which could inform the processes being developed by other SNCBs.

4. Defining Ramsar sites with marine components

Ramsar sites protecting coastal wetlands can contain a mixture of terrestrial, freshwater and marine features, reflecting the listed features of complementary Natura 2000 and ASSI/SSSI designations. To identify 'marine' Ramsar sites it is necessary to assess the site's protected features and their association with the marine environment; assuming that all sites extending below mean high water (or another landward baseline) are 'marine' would incorrectly flag the sites protecting only terrestrial or freshwater features. Similar processes have already been undertaken to identify SACs and SPAs with marine components and ASSI/SSSIs with marine components. As the process of identifying protected features in Ramsar sites is quite complicated in itself, it has been agreed that creating a reference list of Ramsar-specific marine components for UK MPA stocktake purposes would be a very complicated task. As such an approach will be adopted that uses existing marine component guidance for features in Ramsar sites. Another alternative would be to define marine sites using only the 'marine' status of complementary designation(s), however it was felt this would result in loss of detail through oversimplification.

Ramsar site protected features should be assessed against the marine component guidance agreed for other designations and the UK MPA network features list. Non-avian taxa are to be assessed against the reference lists of marine components agreed for SACs² and the reference lists of marine biological components agreed for ASSI/SSSIs³. Ramsar bird features should be assessed against the list of birds agreed in the UK MPA network features list **Error! Bookmark not defined.** (which includes only those with a significant marine association). As the majority of Ramsar site protected features will also be features of SPAs,

⁴ 2009-2012 version of the RIS and its predecessors.

⁵ Defining features and providing advice for Ramsar sites. MPATG18 Paper 5.

SACs and ASSI/SSSI⁶ this provides a quick and reasonably comprehensive first sweep of features.

For example Atlantic salmon, a possible feature of the Severn Estuary Ramsar site, is already defined as a marine component in the guidance on defining SSSIs with marine biological components – this, plus confirmation of salmon's use of the marine environment within the site, is all that needs to be considered to define this as a marine component, regardless of whether salmon is part of the complementary Severn Estuary SPA and SSSIs.

A small proportion of Ramsar site features may not be included in the existing marine component guidance. This small minority of features will be resolved on a case-by-case basis (preferably with agreement between the SNCBs).

To assist this process, an initial quick sift of Ramsar sites is possible to eliminate those which are clearly terrestrial-only. JNCC holds a UK-overview database of Ramsar sites which includes habitat cover data for all sites (originating from the RIS). This data can be filtered to quickly remove those habitat types which are obviously not marine (e.g. freshwater lakes, canals, peatlands). This process can be kept as inclusive as possible to avoid the risk of erroneously excluding marine sites at this stage.

A large part of the results could be verified by cross-checking the Ramsar sites with marine components against the 'marine component' status of their complementary designations.

Candidate features that could be found within either/both the marine and non-marine parts of a site (e.g. coastal lagoons, many fish and birds species) will need careful assessment to confirm that they make significant use of the marine environment in that site. In many cases this can be informed by decisions already made for the same features in complementary SPAs, SACs and ASSI/SSSI.

⁶ This approach only requires a Ramsar feature to occur on a SAC/SPA/ASSI/SSSI reference list of marine components, it does not need to be listed within the specific SAC/SPA/ASSI/SSSI complementing that Ramsar site.