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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE AND NATURAL HABITATS

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BERN CONVENTION: DATA TRANSLATION TO THE EMERALD NETWORK IN THE CONTEXT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

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1. Introduction

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK) is a signatory to the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (1979, known as the Bern Convention). The Bern Convention requires Parties to designate Areas of Special Conservation Interest (ASCI) which together form the Emerald Network. For EU Member States, Natura 2000 sites form their contribution to the Emerald Network.

As of 16 March 2019, the UK had classified 275¹ Special Protection Areas (SPA) in accordance with the Birds Directive, and as of 31 October 2019 had classified 658² Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) in accordance with the Habitats Directive. Together (Figure 1) these sites formed the UK's contribution to the Natura 2000 network within the Atlantic biogeographic region. The sites cover 77 terrestrial, freshwater and marine habitats out to the Exclusive Economic Zone. 93 species listed on Annex II of the Habitats Directive, and 268 bird species listed under the Birds Directive are protected. These sites are also Emerald Network sites under the Bern Convention. The UK has left the EU, but the SACs and SPAs retain the same legal protection under a number of Statutory Instruments.



Figure 1. UK SACs (blue) and SPAs (red).

The structure of the Database and Standard Data Forms for Natura 2000 and the Emerald Network are very similar. The habitats (Resolution No. 4 (1996)) and species (Resolution No. 6 (1998)) listed on the Bern Convention are not identical to those listed under the Birds and Habitats Directives. Although Resolution No. 4 (1996) is aligned to the EUNIS habitat classification, it is not a full transcription of EUNIS. There is a

¹ <u>https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/special-protection-areas-overview/</u>

² <u>https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/special-areas-of-conservation-overview/</u>

relationship between Resolution No. 4 (1996) and Annex I, but it is not always straightforward, and in some cases the matches are partial, or may not exist. The relationship between Annex I and Resolution No. 4 (1996) is likely to need further consideration in the context of alignment of reporting under the Convention, and the Directives.

UK Ministers confirmed to the Standing Committee in 2018 that the UK sites formerly part of the EU's Natura 2000 network will remain as the UK's contribution to the Emerald Network. Environment is a devolved issue in the UK, and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) works with all of the Devolved Administrations and their statutory advisory bodies (Natural England, Natural Resources Wales, NatureScot, and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency).

At the start of the data translation exercise, JNCC and the ETC/BD plus the Secretariat of the Bern Convention worked to identify which Annex 1 habitat features should translate to which features of Resolution No. 4 (1996). It was recognised that advice would be needed for some of the features on a site by site basis. JNCC have been working with the Country Nature Conservation Bodies (CNCBs) to identify the coding changes needed to move data to the Emerald Network database, in particular for habitats listed on Resolution No. 4 (1996). In doing that it has become apparent that some features do not translate as well as had initially been thought.

This note provides an overview of progress with translation of habitat and species features, and the issues encountered.

2. Overlapping sites

To date the Emerald Network has avoided overlapping sites, helped by only having one designation type (birds are designated alongside habitats and other species, not separately). As a member of the European Union, the UK has designated separate SACs and SPAs under the Habitats and Birds Directives respectively. For historical and legal reasons, including ease of adding new sites to the network, this has led to considerable overlap of sites, both within the SAC and SPA networks, and between SACs and SPAs. There is approximately 12.5% overlap between SACs and SPAs (plus overlap within these). Re-designating sites to resolve overlaps would require re-consultation with stakeholders. This would be an enormous amount of work with no conservation benefit.

At a meeting between the UK (Defra and JNCC), the Council of Europe and ETC/BD in March 2019, it was suggested that UK SACs and SPAs should remain unaltered at the national (UK) level, but in their presentation to the Emerald Network they could be aggregated to remove overlaps. This approach would maintain the overlaps within the UK's SAC and SPA networks, but individual Emerald Network sites might be presented from the outer boundaries of overlapping SACs and SPAs. JNCC examined the feasibility of this approach, but concluded that merging sites based on geographic overlap alone creates arbitrary conglomerations of sites (Figure 2a,b) which can lack ecological validity. Rather than providing a simple cosmetic fix, the approach would create additional complex issues concerning the spatial relationships between sites and the ecological/ecosystem links between the protected features.

As a result the UK has no plans to change the basis of overlapping site designations. This may however create issues for presentation of the UK sites on the Emerald Network Viewer, and for management of the data in the Emerald Network Database.



Figure 2a. Southern North Sea and eastern England. Very large aggregated site (outlined in blue) combining 42 SACs and SPAs, ranging from Dogger Bank SAC (wholly offshore) in the central North Sea through to The Broads SAC in East Anglia (freshwater and terrestrial).



Figure 2b. Scotland. Large aggregated site (outlined in blue) combining 62 SACs and SPAs, spanning from the west to east coasts and combining terrestrial, freshwater and marine sites. Protected features range from benthic habitats and cetaceans (e.g. in Moray Firth SAC) to upland and montane species and habitats (e.g. Cairngorms SACs and SPAs). Many other sites in close proximity and surrounded by the broader aggregated site remain separate.

3. Habitat data translation

Translation for all species features on all of the SPAs (275 sites) and 62 SACs which are just designated for species features was straightforward.

For the 77 Annex I habitats which occur in the UK, the features were split into a number of categories:

- 1. Direct translation: Annex I = Resolution No. 4 (1996)
- 2. Merge: Multiple Annex I habitats translate to one Resolution No. 4 (1996) habitat.
- 3. Split: An Annex I habitat translates to more than one Resolution No. 4 (1996) habitats so a decision is needed as to which of the corresponding Resolution No. 4 (1996) habitat(s) is the correct translation on a site by site basis.
- 4. Partial: An Annex I habitat translates in part to a Resolution No. 4 (1996) habitat, and in part to another (or more than one).

Given this complexity, it has been necessary to split the translation work into two tranches. Tranche 1 consists of the sites with just species features, and category 1 habitats. Tranche 2 consists of sites with category 2, 3, or 4 habitats. In all cases, the sites must have all habitat features translated. So a site with both category 1 and 3 habitats would fall into tranche 2 rather than tranche 1. JNCC initially intended to deliver data in advance of the meeting of the Group of Experts on Protected Areas and Ecological Networks (GoEPAEN), but discovered problems such as incorrect transcription during the sign-off stage so are having to redo some of the work. In essence, the issue is not just the translation of the habitat codes, but also considering the knock-on effects of merging or splitting habitats on other parts of section 3.1 of the Standard Data Form, such as the area cover, and relative surface area. This proved to be complex for some circumstances and it has been necessary to develop a set of rules to make sure this is approached consistently.

For 26 features in categories 3 and 4, it was determined that site by site information would be required from the CNCBs. There are 418 SACs with one or more of these 26 features, leading to 1,056 site-habitat feature

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The currently available information³ shows (of these 26 habitats – see Annex 1 for detail):

- 11 habitats on 361 sites could be translated without difficulty.
- 7 habitats on 130 sites have a partial translation though some were rather forced.
- 7 habitats on 101 sites had no translation according to UK habitat specialists.

4. Approach adopted

Given the position set out in Section 2 JNCC and the CNCBs worked to translate as much as possible, but where there was only a partial translation, or where a translation was not possible, the UK intends to use Field 4.2 in the Standard Data Form to document the EUNIS habitats that are not on Resolution No. 4 (1996) but for which the fit is better, or for which Annex I habitat also corresponds (see section 4).

Some of the difficult to translate features were also the only features occurring on some sites (see Annex 2).

JNCC has held a technical discussion with the Secretariat of the Bern Convention and international experts about the complexity encountered with some of the translations. While the international experts provided advice in respect to the interpretation of some habitats, time and resources in JNCC and the CNCBs has not allowed any further work to be undertaken yet.

5. Text to document features that are difficult to translate

To ensure there is clarity on our approach to handling the issues identified above, we have added the following text in Field 4.2 of the Standard Data Form which is a free text field:

Where possible, habitat features have been translated from Habitats Directive Annex I codes. In some cases, only a partial translation was possible, and in a few cases no direct translation was possible.

For this site, Annex I habitat [feature number and name] was partially translated to Resolution No. 4 (1996) habitat [number and name]. According to UK national experts, a full translation would be to EUNIS habitat [number and name] [and habitat number and name] which is not on Resolution No. 4 (1996). The area of the Annex I habitat was [xxHa, yy%] of the site. It was not possible to divide the area of the Annex I habitat between the Resolution No. 4 (1996) habitats to which the Annex I habitat has been translated.

For this site it was not possible to translate Annex I habitat [number and name (Area Extent xxHa, Area Cover yy%)] as it matches with EUNIS habitat [number and name] which, according to UK national experts is not listed on Resolution No. 4 (1996).

A timebound workplan devised in consultation with the Secretariat and international experts, would be necessary to decide how to resolve the issues identified.

6. Issues for discussion

Following from the work described above there are some technical issues that the Group of Experts may wish to consider.

1. One of the issues that JNCC and CNCBs have encountered is alignment of the Annex I habitats with Resolution No. 4 (1996) habitats – particularly with merging or splitting habitats. Part of this may be

³ Note these habitats may occur in more than one of the categories.

around being on the edge of the Atlantic Biogeographic region, and therefore how well the habitat descriptions fit, part of it is likely to be differences of opinion between national and international specialists. UK needs to think further about the non-translations. The Group of Experts may wish to comment on how strictly the descriptions should be applied, and how specific the level of alignment should be.

- 2. The UK will bring with it a complete UK contribution to the Emerald Network; how can this be used to support other Parties to complete their own networks, and what differences in the process to propose/adopt sites used by the Group of Experts might be needed as a result of that complete network?
- 3. The UK's site network includes a lot of marine sites (both inshore and offshore). How could these be used to support the Bern Convention's marine network? The UK also has a number of OSPAR Convention sites, which are not Natura 2000 sites, as do other Parties to the Bern Convention. Achieving consistency between these sites and Emerald Network marine sites could be used to support the Bern Convention's marine network. Is this an area worth exploring?

Annex 1 – Details of habitats that needed site by site checking by CNCB specialists.

26 Habitats investigated in Tranche 2

- H1210 Annual vegetation of drift lines
- H1220 Perennial vegetation of stony banks
- H1230 Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic coasts
- H2130 Fixed dunes with herbaceous vegetation (`grey dunes`)
- H2170 Dunes with Salix repens ssp. argentea (Salicion arenariae)
- H3110 Oligotrophic waters containing very few minerals of sandy plains (*Littorelletalia uniflorae*)
- H3130 Oligotrophic to mesotrophic standing waters with vegetation of the *Littorelletea uniflorae* and/or of the *Isoëto-Nanojuncetea*
- H3140 Hard oligo-mesotrophic waters with benthic vegetation of *Chara* spp.
- H3150 Natural eutrophic lakes with Magnopotamion or Hydrocharition-type vegetation
- H3160 Natural dystrophic lakes and ponds
- H3170 Mediterranean temporary ponds
- H3260 Water courses of plain to montane levels with the *Ranunculion fluitantis* and *Callitricho-Batrachion* vegetation
- H4060 Alpine and Boreal heaths
- H4080 Sub-Arctic Salix spp. scrub
- H6150 Siliceous alpine and boreal grasslands
- H6210 Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies: on calcareous substrates (Festuco-Brometalia)
- H6230 Species-rich *Nardus* grassland, on siliceous substrates in mountain areas (and submountain areas in continental Europe)
- H6430 Hydrophilous tall herb fringe communities of plains and of the montane to alpine levels
- H7140 Transition mires and quaking bogs
- H7150 Depressions on peat substrates of the *Rhynchosporion*
- H7210 Calcareous fens with Cladium mariscus and species of the Caricion davallianae
- H7220 Petrifying springs with tufa formation (*Cratoneurion*)
- H7230 Alkaline fens
- H9180 Tilio-Acerion forests of slopes, screes and ravines
- H91D0 Bog woodland
- H91E0 Alluvial forests with *Alnus glutinosa* and *Fraxinus excelsior* (*Alno-Padion, Alnion incanae, Salicion albae*)

11 of 26 Habitats for which translations have been identified

- H1210 Annual vegetation of drift lines
- H2130 Fixed dunes with herbaceous vegetation (`grey dunes`)
- H2170 Dunes with Salix repens ssp. argentea (Salicion arenariae)
- H3110 Oligotrophic waters containing very few minerals of sandy plains (*Littorelletalia uniflorae*)
- H3140 Hard oligo-mesotrophic waters with benthic vegetation of *Chara* spp.
- H3150 Natural eutrophic lakes with *Magnopotamion* or *Hydrocharition*-type vegetation
- H3160 Natural dystrophic lakes and ponds
- H3170 Mediterranean temporary ponds
- H6210 Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies: on calcareous substrates (Festuco-Brometalia)
- H7230 Alkaline fens
- H91D0 Bog woodland

7 of 26 Habitats where partial translation is possible for some sites

- H1220 Perennial vegetation of stony banks
- H1230 Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic coasts
- H3130 Oligotrophic to mesotrophic standing waters with vegetation of the *Littorelletea uniflorae* and/or of the *Isoëto-Nanojuncetea*
- H4080 Sub-Arctic Salix spp. scrub
- H6150 Siliceous alpine and boreal grasslands
- H7140 Transition mires and quaking bogs
- H7150 Depressions on peat substrates of the *Rhynchosporion*

7 of 26 habitats for which CNCB specialists advise no translation is possible for some sites

- H1220 Perennial vegetation of stony banks
- H1230 Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic coasts
- H3130 Oligotrophic to mesotrophic standing waters with vegetation of the *Littorelletea uniflorae* and/or of the *Isoëto-Nanojuncetea*
- H3260 Water courses of plain to montane levels with the *Ranunculion fluitantis* and *Callitricho-Batrachion* vegetation
- H6150 Siliceous alpine and boreal grasslands
- H6230 Species-rich *Nardus* grassland, on siliceous substrates in mountain areas (and submountain areas in continental Europe)
- H9180 Tilio-Acerion forests of slopes, screes and ravines

For two of these habitats (H3260 and H9180) there are a number of sites for which the habitat is the only feature on the site.