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EUROPEAN COMMITTEE FOR THE CONSERVATION
OF NATURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES (CDPE)

Committee of Experts - Protected areas

Renewal of the European Diploma
for the Purbeck Heritage Coast
(Category C)

Expert's report
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SECRETARIAT MEMORANDUM
prepared by
the Directorate of Environment
and Local Authorities

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This report has three parts. The first deals with visits to the site and the impressions gained during these. The second looks at the plan to set up and extend oil extraction facilities on Furzey Island. The third and last part proposed renewal of the European Diploma of the Council of Europe and also gives some firm recommendations to officials of Dorset County Council and British Petroleum management.

I - The area concerned

Purbeck Heritage Coast covers a coastal area of some 700 km². It is south of London in the county of Dorset, near the town of Dorchester and between the port towns of Weymouth and Bournemouth. It falls completely within an area classified as being of "outstanding natural beauty". It includes various types of coastal landscapes, comprising farmland, wooded hills and rolling heath land, lagoons, islands and coastal bays, where chalk cliffs form a strangely jagged but clear-cut dividing line between land and sea.

The tourist tradition in the whole area goes back a very long way, thanks to its beautiful scenery and its climate and facilities for sports activities linked with the sea (sailing, windsurfing, sub-aqua diving, fishing, etc). The proximity of major centres of population means that this tourism is evenly divided between summer holidays and weekend breaks throughout the year. Tourism and farming are vital elements in local development, particularly since the decline of activities connected with small-scale inshore fishing.

a. Mobile homes at Lulworth Cove

The presence of a huge caravan and mobile home site near the shore on a hill overlooking Lulworth Cove is an outrageous manifestation of the importance of tourist activity. The site is on private land, and it seems that permission was originally given for a much smaller-scale facility, concealed by a thicket of umbrella pines.

This site, as it now appears during the summer months, is an intolerable blot on a fine landscape. A possible remedy would be to grow more trees and to make better use of the relief of the land to hide the many-coloured caravans. It may well be that the adoption of a uniform colour for all the mobile homes might lead to some immediate improvement in this deplorable situation.

b. Educational exhibition

On the other hand, an educational exhibition on the marine environment and the geology of the area, which has been set up in an old coastguard's hut at the entrance to Lulworth Cove harbour, is very indicative of the activities of the permanent Heritage Coast team: the search for sponsorship (Heinz), the use of volunteer and unemployed labour, the co-ordination of goodwill, educational action and public participation in efforts to protect the environment.

c. Footpath

At Lulworth Cove, which is necessarily on the route of the major coastal footpath, it is easy to realise how fragile the chalk landscape is

and how ugly a dusty, dirty white gash across the side of a hill - caused by the passage of too many feet along the footpath - can be. Surfacing of this path with a dark-coloured covering (bitumen) would both prevent further erosion and eliminate this blot on the landscape.

d. Military co-operation

Another very interesting experiment, indicative of the spirit of those who are responsible for the Purbeck Heritage Coast, is the fruitful co-operation which they have successfully entered into with the Army. The latter owns more than 3,000 hectares of woods and grassland along the coastline and under the sea, available for manoeuvres by the British Army tank gunnery school and actually used for a good part of the year as a mobile artillery firing range.

The Army has agreed to open its land to the public - when no exercises are going on, of course - and in fact the firing training programme is drawn up with an eye to tourist periods, and effective means of informing footpath users about periods of opening and closure now exist.

What is more, the Army, with its manpower and financial potential, is playing an active part in the maintenance of footpaths and fences and even in the restoration of the traditional buildings (school and church) near to the major coastal path in which educational exhibitions are to be held. Thanks to the presence of the Army and to special financial conditions, a traditional farm is still in place, and the Army keeps a flock of sheep, managed by a farmer, which ensures the preservation of the natural grassland. Lastly, in conjunction with the permanent Purbeck Heritage Coast team, it has drawn up and begun to implement a plan to protect wind-break hedges, which is intended to restore the integrity of the traditional landscape.

e. A vulnerable marine reserve

The Kimmeridge marine reserve shows the Purbeck Heritage Coast in another light. It is true that the responsible team has again adopted a co-ordinating function and taken effective steps to protect a biotope, in this case privately owned, and to educate the public, with the active support of the landowners. Voluntary associations and young unemployed people have played a major part in the success of the venture, which has apparently been a huge success with young people, especially during school terms. Some of the credit for this success goes to the two lady wardens, who have exceptional qualities and, in particular, an ability to put their message across.

However, we may wonder at the lack of involvement of the nearby universities in genuine in-depth research; they could at least help to produce an accurate analysis of the situation and scientifically to monitor the development of this particularly well-protected micro-biotope.

Yet this reserve, which has no legal protection, and where it appears that no warden has ever been called into action, is admirably effective. What will happen to it if its ownership ever changes hands or if the wardens leave and are not replaced? It is highly desirable that the legal position should be tightened up in good time.

Moving on from the reserve through the coastal villages of Kington and Worth Matravers, it is easy to realise the impact that tourism has had in this region, and tourism is now increasingly swamping the traditional activity of farming. Numerous old farmhouses have been converted into homes, and a good number of farmers are offering tourist accommodation.

f. The experience of the National Trust

As the National Trust has acquired a large amount of farmland in this area, it is able to carry out interesting direct experiments on the use of sheep to maintain natural grasslands and to prevent the spread of bracken and tree-like vegetation. Quite obviously, this kind of experiment, which is essential at a time when there is so much talk of abandoning farmland of indifferent quality or leaving it fallow, requires that the immediate concern for productivity be dropped from the outset and replaced by a concept of efficiency in terms of the protection of, and public access to, the landscape. Only a body which controls the land and is on a sound financial footing can indulge in this sort of experiment.

The role of the permanent Purbeck Heritage Coast team is to provide information about the results of experiments conducted and particularly to enable the area's stock-breeders, including the managers of the Army's flock, to benefit from these.

In another sector, immediately adjacent to the sea, on an imposing site where the cliffs fall sheer into the sea, the National Trust is conducting other experiments, re-creating traditional natural grasslands on land which has been worked and used for cereals, and replanting forest trees very close to the sea, using plastic materials to combat the harmful effects of the sea wind and salt spray.

These experiments are being monitored, and the results published, by the Nature Conservancy Council.

g. A public education operation

Durlston Country Park is a rural property on a headland which is very typical of this chalk cliff coastline. It is a joint venture between the Dorset County Council and the Countryside Commission, which provides a subsidy. The latter is a remarkable British institution, which conducts all its usual activities in the country park, including reception of the public, education, the issuing of documents and the preparation of educational trails. The Purbeck Heritage Coast team is associated with all the activities which take place there and relies very heavily on the facilities provided for visitors through the larve investment which has been made. However, there seems to be no structural link between the two institutions, except via the County Council. Durlston Country Park was created before the birth of the Purbeck Heritage Coast project and has merged into it perfectly, but it could exist and carry out its role just as well if it were completely independent.

h. An island reserve

Brownsea Island is at the entrance to Poole harbour in an area heavily used by shipping. It belongs to the National Trust, and it has therefore been possible not only to preserve its natural integrity, but also to create

a public promenade (open only to pedestrians) and a nature reserve, of which the part which is on land had begun to be taken over by rhododendrons and bracken, but it is now being restored. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the red squirrel, which has completely disappeared from the rest of Great Britain, is found there. The lagoon, on the other hand, which is protected from the harmful effects of shipping by an earth breakwater, is host to a very large number of species of Anatidae, Limicolae, Gallatores, etc, which either nest there or stop there during migration. Observation posts have been set up, and numbers are regularly counted.

It should be noted that, in the public part of Brownsea Island, the memory of Baden Powell, who held his first scout camp there, is still honoured. The National Trust was deliberately chosen, so that it could highlight the historical and cultural interest, to the detriment of the preservation of the natural heritage.

i. Co-operation with the bird reserve

Crossing the Studland Heath national nature reserve and visiting the Arne reserve, which is managed by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, shows how many very interesting sites are packed into the area of the Purbeck Heritage Coast and the care taken to protect them by the relevant British institutions. A simple story will provide a perfect illustration of the effective co-ordinating role played by the Purbeck Heritage Coast team.

A bird reserve like that at Arne is, by definition, not open to the general public. However, this reserve happens to be crossed by a footpath. Despite their traditional good manners, British ramblers were frequently straying from the footpath, and could have disturbed nesting birds, so the warden's time was fully taken up with dealing with the numerous people who broke the rules.

The Purbeck Heritage Coast team entered into negotiations on opening up some areas in a certain part of the reserve to the public and providing car parking, information boards and leaflets. Hardly anyone now breaks the rules, and the warden can devote all his attention to managing the reserve for which he is responsible.

II - Oil installations

The oil drilling complex within the area of the Purbeck Heritage Coast has existed since 1970, so it pre-dates the award of the European Diploma; at the time of the award, the complex was rightly considered to be perfectly integrated into the landscape and not to have any potentially adverse effects on the rich variety of flora and fauna. Daily output was then 5,500 barrels. The current plan is for it to be multiplied at least tenfold, ie to produce more than 60,000 barrels per day. Is production at that level compatible with respect for, and protection of, such a vulnerable, very high quality environment?

The oil field in question is operated by British Petroleum, which has operational plans involving the drilling of wells on Furzey Island, a major collecting complex in the middle of the forest at Wytch Heath, on the coast, and a piping network to take products (such as gas, naptha, etc) to loading centres (rail and pipeline) or distribution centres (gas). The pipes concerned are very large diameter underground pipelines.

We had the opportunity to study the measures taken to prevent any risk of pollution at the drilling site on Furzey Island and at the collecting centre at Wytch Heath, the effects which the new structures might have on the integrity of the landscape and the consequences of the pipeline-laying operations and service road construction.

1. Drilling and pumping

Furzey Island, which covers about 12 hectares, rises to a height of 7 to 9 metres in the roadstead off Poole. The first major risk is a visual one, but this will be followed by the main risk, which is one of pollution if hydrocarbons are discharged. One drilling rig is to be constructed, but only for the drilling period, which is estimated to be a maximum of 40 days. It will then be replaced by a pumping system which will be completely hidden by trees. The flares which might be necessary to burn off unusable gas will be set up in hollows dug in the ground in such a way that they are virtually invisible from the shore. Company officials have assured us that, once the period of drilling itself has finished, the installations will be completely invisible from the coast.

The most serious pollution risk is that there could be a leak during drilling; such leaks are always difficult to stop, especially if they begin after a gas pocket has occurred. Company officials have assured us that every precaution has been taken to ensure that, even if a leak did occur and could not be stopped within a week, not a drop of oil would reach the sea. In the very unlikely event that the leak continued for a longer period, a system of mud barriers would still enable a considerable quantity of oil to be confined to a narrow length of sea, thus limiting the risk of pollution to this single location. The technicians sound as if they really have provided for every possible disaster. Of course, a quart pot can hold a pint, and the permanent facilities provided to deal with possible major pollution will be all the more capable of preventing minor pollution due to seepage during pumping. The drilling areas are structured in such a way that even in the event of torrential rain falling on them, all the residual water will be collected for treatment and de-oiling before being returned to the normal cycle. Here again, the technicians seem to be in full control of any possible risks.

2. The collecting centre

There is already a collecting centre in the Wytch Heath area, in the middle of a wood of Scots pines in a very flat part of the bay. The trees and other vegetation currently make it very difficult to glimpse the oil installations from positions overlooking the bay and the islands.

The new installations are being constructed very close to the first ones. Their design is such that only the topmost part of the highest towers should project by several metres above the treetops. These towers are to be painted in shades which will render them virtually invisible to a rambler who does not know that they are there.

Construction is being carried out with a very genuine concern to preserve the natural character of the area. Archaeological digs are under way on the sites which are to be used, in order to avoid losing any remaining traces of the past. A very precise list of outstanding trees has been drawn up, in order to ensure that these are either preserved or, in the event that they absolutely have to be felled, replaced. Effective measures are to be taken to ensure that there is no risk of hydrocarbon or gas pollution. As things stand, it is difficult to find any shortcomings in the planned arsenal of protective measures, but their effectiveness will of course have to be judged once they have been introduced and applied.

3. Access route and pipeline construction

Everything that has been said above in respect of the drilling site and the collecting centre also applies to construction work on the oil removal facilities. Plans have been drawn up with extreme concern for the preservation of the natural environment, and if these are implemented to the letter, the current situation ought not to be adversely affected by their implementation.

III- Conclusion

The area of the Purbeck Heritage Coast is extremely beautiful and, while it may seem impossible, oil drilling ought to be able to go on there without diminishing its natural beauty and richness. BP management has clearly decided to do all that is necessary to strengthen the company's reputation as a protector of nature in this area, which thousands of visitors will be able to judge for themselves. It is important to take advantage of this fact to make sure that the company's plans are effectively carried out to the letter, something which, it seems to me, necessarily means considering the possibility of having the initial work, the drilling and the subsequent operation of the oil field monitored by a commission of experts, who would be empowered to ask for the European Diploma to be withdrawn if necessary. It must be borne in mind that British Petroleum will in future be able to point to the diploma as proof of its skills in respect of the protection of the environment. Hence the need to make sure that the plans submitted are carried out correctly throughout.

This inspection also enabled us to realise the effectiveness, within a given area, of a high quality team of wardens, capable of encouraging more contributions from, and directing and coordinating the efforts of, everyone concerned. Surprising results have been achieved with limited resources. Politicians, administrators, businessmen and volunteers are all involved in a joint education and protection campaign to ensure that this high quality environment is preserved.

On the other hand, two questions cast shadows on this idyllic picture:

1. What is to be the future of the Purbeck Heritage Coast, an institution which has no financial guarantees whatsoever? It has so far managed its affairs from day to day really successfully, making calls upon every usable source in no particular order. Does this not indicate a certain failure on the part of the authorities to take the matter seriously, when they refuse to devote a specific share of funds each year to the protection of this exceptional heritage?
2. Who will be able to ensure that this institution, especially the marine reserves, continues in perpetuity, if there are no regulations which guarantee control in the event of a change of ownership, for example.

Purbeck Heritage Coast is one of the most favoured areas of old Europe and can and must remain so, even if a very large oil field is to be operated within its area. This may be regarded as a trial run and an example, if it is carefully monitored throughout (construction and subsequent operations). However, it would be appropriate for the local authorities also to realise the vulnerability of an institution which has nevertheless proved its effectiveness. It is important that they should give it legal and financial means of continuing in perpetuity.

On these conditions, it seems perfectly justified to renew the European Diploma awarded to the Purbeck Heritage Coast.