



STRANGFORD LOUGH MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE
FOURTH REPORT 2001-2004

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ACRONYMS USED

ABC	-	Ards Borough Council
ASSI	-	Area of Special Scientific Interest
CIL	-	Commissioners of Irish Lights
DARD	-	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
DDC	-	Down District Council
DRD	-	Department for Regional Development
DOE	-	Department of the Environment
EHS	-	Environment and Heritage Service
EU	-	European Union
LLA	-	Local Lighthouse Authority
MCA	-	Maritime & Coastguard Agency
SAC	-	Special Area of Conservation
SLMC	-	Strangford Lough Management Committee (former name for what is now the Strangford Lough Management Advisory Committee)

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SPA	-	Special Protection Area
SLECI	-	Strangford Lough Ecological Change Investigation



CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION



Gil Stevenson (Chairman SLMC)

It is my privilege to introduce this Report covering the proceedings and activities of the Strangford Lough Management Committee (SLMC) from April 2001 to February 2004.

The citation on the application for designation of Strangford Lough as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) describes the Lough, simply, as a large shallow inlet and bay. Well, I can assure you there is nothing 'simple' at all about Strangford Lough. In fact, the Lough is an extremely complex marine / terrestrial ecosystem, involving a wide range of species from both the animal and plant kingdoms, including, of course, Man. Fortunately we are sufficiently advanced, as a species, to recognise that, while the plants and animals are perfectly capable of looking after themselves when left to themselves, we humans retain an uncanny ability to put our environmental foot right in it. The SLMC is, simply, an initiative to help us tread more carefully. The Committee consists of representatives from the Lough's principal stakeholder organisations (see page 3), and its function is to advise Government, both central and local, on issues relating to the conservation and sustainable development of the Lough.

The candidate SAC designation requires the design and implementation of a management scheme to facilitate the monitoring of the status and wellbeing of the various Conservation Features for which designation was sought. The SAC submission was made by Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) to the European Union (EU) back in January 1996, and still awaits a decision from Europe.

Previous Committees have contributed significantly to the design phase of this Management Scheme, and the EHS officially launched the Scheme in 2001. However, the current Committee has repeatedly expressed considerable concern at the lack of progress in implementing the monitoring phase. As yet, there is no satisfactory routine monitoring of any of the SAC Conservation Features.

It became evident during the reporting period that one of those Conservation Features, namely the horse mussel (*Modiolus modiolus*) community, fell into severe decline. This species is not of great interest in itself, but the animals clump together in colonies on the sea bed, thereby forming biogenic reefs and creating a habitat for a myriad of other organisms of considerably greater conservation interest.

It should not be presumed, however, that had an operational monitoring scheme been in place, then the horse mussel losses might have been avoided or lessened in some way. A considerable number of years of monitoring data will have to be accumulated and analysed before we can get even a sense of the variations in the pulse of the Lough's ecology, never mind being able to tell whether that variation is normal or abnormal. This is long term research, and will require long term commitment from Government. On the positive side, this *Modiolus* 'event', and, quite possibly, the associated spectre of Infraction Proceedings, has triggered a renewed urgency in this area. This includes the Strangford Lough Ecological Change Investigation (SLECI), commissioned by the EHS, and which will be reporting shortly.

There have, of course, been many other matters receiving our attention. The Committee has had input to the drafting of legislation and regulations concerning, for example, notification procedures relating to Areas of Special Scientific Interest (the Lough's shore is an ASSI), and the prohibition of mechanical methods of harvesting shellfish. A methodology for the selection of a site for a new waste water treatment works at Portaferry was studied in some detail, and discovered to be flawed. A number of major planning applications were examined and issues arising from these, positive and negative, brought to the attention of developers and planners. The Committee also progressed proposals to improve aids to navigation in the Lough.

As part of a routine audit exercise, the EHS commissioned a report on the functioning and effectiveness of the SLMC. It is pleasing to note that this study expressed praise for the quality and range of output from the Committee and its Working Groups. I attribute this directly to the enthusiasm of the Members themselves, past and present, and to the stewardship of my predecessors with the assistance and support of the

Strangford Lough Office. In particular, it recommended that the title "Strangford Lough Management Committee" should be changed to "Strangford Lough Management Advisory Committee" to emphasise the non-executive advisory role of the Committee, a change we ourselves had already proposed.

The Strangford Lough Information Network (initiated by the Strangford Lough Management Committee) won both the education category and the overall prize in the Web Awards Northern Ireland 2001 for the design and content of its website about the Lough (www.strangfordlough.org). An interactive CD about the Lough was launched at the 2003 Spring-Clean Event, and has proved immensely popular among school children. The high level of awareness of the environment among these young people bodes well for the future.

In closing, I thank the Members of the Committee for their input to our proceedings and for their support and enthusiasm for the concept of the Strangford Lough Management Advisory Committee, and all those from various organisations and Government who have contributed presentations, expertise and advice at Meetings and in Working Groups. We are all indebted to the inexhaustible dedication and support from the Strangford Lough Officer, Caroline Nolan, the Committee's Secretary, Margaret Byers, and the Strangford Lough Liaison Group's Secretary, Elizabeth O'Prey.



Gil Stevenson (Chairman SLMC)



Pyramidal Orchid

MEMBERSHIP AND REPRESENTATION

Member organisations nominate representatives who are then appointed by the Department of the Environment (DOE). The Committee is supported by both the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and senior officers from both

Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) and DARD - Fisheries Division attend meetings. Their contribution is greatly valued by the Committee. Other Government representatives attend meetings on an occasional basis when relevant topics are on the agenda.

Strangford Lough Management Committee 2001 - 2004

- [Ards Borough Council](#) - Councillor R Gibson, Councillor T J McBriar, Alderman J Shannon
- [Association of Strangford Lough Yacht Clubs](#) - Mr G Stevenson
- [Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside](#) - Mr B Coburn
- [Departmental Nominee](#) - Lady D Dunleath, Dr P Boaden
- [Down District Council](#) - Councillor D Curran, Councillor E Rea
- [Joint Council of Wildfowling Associations of Strangford Lough](#) - Mr D Stephenson
- [The National Trust](#) - Mr D Thompson
- [Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association](#) - Mr H C Keating
- [Northern Ireland Environment Link](#) - Mr J Kitchen
- [Northern Ireland Federation of Sub-Aqua Clubs](#) - Mr H Edwards
- [Northern Ireland Fish Producers Organisation Limited](#) - Mr R James
- [Royal Society for the Protection of Birds](#) - Mr D Allen
- [Royal Yachting Association](#) - Mr N de Cogan
- [Shellfish Association of GB](#) - Mr N Stephens
- [Sports Council for Northern Ireland](#) - Ms C Wright
- [Strangford Lough Fishermen's Association](#) - Mr M Carter
- [Strangford Lough Nature Conservation Association](#) - Mr D Chamberlain, Sir Dennis Faulkner, Mr P Johnston, Mr J Martin
- [Ulster Farmers Union](#) - Mr J Kerr, Mr W D McDonnell
- [Ulster Wildlife Trust](#) - Mr J Furphy, Ms Pippa Morrison
- [DOE Observer](#): Mr Robert Bleakley
- [DARD Observer](#): Mr Kenny Parker
- [Officer](#): Ms Caroline Nolan
- [Secretary](#): Mrs Margaret Byers

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How the Committee and its Working Groups Operate

The full Committee meets once every second month, however much work is carried out between these meetings through smaller Working Groups that may also involve people from outside of the Committee who have specialist knowledge or expertise. In this capacity members are non-representational (unlike the main Committee) and the emphasis is on in-depth analysis and consideration of topics. Working Groups meet as required to discuss issues and are active for as long as is necessary for the task in hand. During this term the following Groups were active: Planning, Environmental Monitoring,

Emergency Pollution Incident Response and Aquaculture / Fisheries.

The Committee thanks its own Members and others who contributed to these Working Groups. (See subject areas for lists of participants). Thanks are also extended to staff in the many organisations who have supported and assisted the Committee in its work, including all of those involved in the annual "Spring-Clean" of the Lough's shores.

STRANGFORD LOUGH SAC / SPA MANAGEMENT SCHEME

The Strangford Lough Special Area of Conservation / Special Protection Area Management Scheme was produced by EHS in conjunction with DARD, Ards Borough Council and Down District Council. The SLMC and the National Trust contributed to the Scheme. All competent and relevant authorities are required under EU legislation to meet the Conservation Objectives, which lie at the heart of the Scheme. Much of the work outlined in the Scheme falls under the remit of EHS and it is charged with advising other authorities on the Conservation Features and the factors affecting them. However, all of the bodies represented on the Strangford Lough Liaison Group have a role to play in delivering management.

The Scheme includes Management Objectives and Actions for 2000 - 2003. Significant elements of this Action Plan were not implemented. The problem seems to lie primarily in the fact that the Scheme's objectives were not incorporated into the operational targets of the Liaison Group organisations. It is also the case that some of the Objectives were not specific enough.

It is important that the revised Action Plan includes specific tasks which will help to protect the Conservation Features and that the Plan is implemented within the given time-scale. It must be noted, however that in some cases change may be the result of "natural processes" rather than current human interventions.

The effectiveness of the Liaison Group as a means of delivering management has been queried by the Committee and it is hoped that when the new Action Plan is implemented it will provide more robust management.

ENVIRONMENT AND HERITAGE SERVICE REVIEW OF SLMC

(comment provided by Environment and Heritage Service)

Environment and Heritage Service, as the principal funder of the Committee, commissioned a review of its operations in 1992 to coincide with its tenth anniversary. Williamson Consulting was successful in a tendered competition to carry out the review. Its terms of reference required Williamson to assess the extent to which SLMC fulfilled its objectives of providing cross-sectoral advice to Government on matters connected with the conservation, use and enjoyment of the Lough. It was also required to assess the value for money provided by the Committee, its relationships with its funders, the Strangford Lough Liaison Group and Strangford Lough Office, and to provide recommendations on their future role and development.

Williamson consulted with the three funding bodies, with members of the Committee and the Liaison Group and with several of their parent bodies. It reported in January of 2003.

The Williamson Report found that the Committee served an important role, both in providing advice to Government and in broadening the perspectives of stakeholders through hearing the views of other members. It found that the savings to Government resulting from the work of the Committee far outweigh its annual cost, making it excellent value for money.

Though sounding a note of caution that the Strangford Lough Office should not itself become an executive body, Williamson concluded that the additional work it was carrying out did not compromise the independence of SLMC, which it saw as critically important.

Williamson recommended that the name of the Committee be changed to the Strangford Lough Management Advisory Committee, to emphasise that it is not an executive body. He also suggested that the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust be invited to nominate a member, given the higher profile achieved by WWT in recent years in the conservation of the Lough. Williamson made several recommendations to improve procedures for the appointing and working of the Committee. In addition he recommended that the terms of reference be extended to include the role of the Committee in communicating its work, in sharing advice, in improving understanding of the Lough and issues facing it, and in fostering a collaborative approach to its management. He also proposed extending the role of the Strangford Lough Officer to improving communication between the Committee and the Liaison Group, and appointing a part-time project officer.

ENVIRONMENTAL MONITORING

Strangford Lough is a complex and changing environment. Managing the Lough would be an impossible task without some understanding of that environment and the factors affecting it. While considerable data is available on some aspects of the Lough's habitats and species eg bird data has been built up over decades, there are still many gaps in our knowledge and there is no overall programme for monitoring the distribution, quantity and quality of key features on a regular basis.

In October 2001 EHS officially launched the publication of the Strangford Lough SAC / SPA Management Scheme (the Scheme was in fact in place from 2000). Within this Scheme Government gave a commitment to undertake a comprehensive monitoring programme, but it is still not in place. Without it there are no triggers for action in the event that one or more of the Conservation Features goes into decline.

The collapse of the Lough's horse mussel community provides a stark example of how the Lough's ecology can change relatively quickly. Unfortunately the monitoring undertaken by DARD over the past decade to assess the impact of commercial fishing on seabed communities did not detect this change. Methodologies used in the DARD surveys could not distinguish dead shell from living organisms and as late as December 2001 the Committee received a presentation from EHS and DARD with maps showing large areas of apparently "healthy" *Modiolus modiolus* beds. We now know that very little remains of the once extensive beds and Government has put a temporary ban on fishing with mobile gear as part of its efforts to conserve what remains.

We will never know whether there would have been an opportunity to slow or reverse this decline, but the fact remains that even the most basic environmental information was not available to guide the management of the fishery and / or other relevant activities.



Research And Monitoring On The Lough - Measuring Photosynthesis In Seaweed

In 2002 the Committee set up an Environmental Monitoring Working Group to work with Government to ensure that the commissioning, scope and dissemination of scientific information meets management needs. The Group provides an open and constructive forum for discussion between EHS, DARD, Committee Members and others, on issues relevant to environmental monitoring and it helps to inform SLMC's views on this topic.

Environmental Monitoring Working Group Members: Dave Allen, Dr Pat Boaden, Joe Breen, Dick James, Philip Johnston, Pippa Morrison, Caroline Nolan, Matt Service, Gil Stevenson and David Thompson.

The Committee remains seriously concerned at the gaps in current information on the Lough's ecology. Good environmental information is essential to assess how human activities or natural processes are affecting Strangford Lough. Without it, Government cannot fulfil its obligations in relation to safeguarding an internationally important environmental asset.

In March 2003, on the recommendation of its Environmental Monitoring Working Group the Committee wrote to EHS as follows:

"The SAC Management Scheme, produced by EHS in 2000, states that broad-scale surveys will be undertaken as a matter of priority. During consultation on the Scheme, SLMC made specific recommendations with regard to the seabed survey, including the need to use divers to gather information, in conjunction with other methods."

The Committee would stress its continued concern at the lack of an up-to-date picture of the distribution, coverage and general condition of the Lough's seabed communities. This is particularly worrying in view of the continued development of activities, under the control of statutory authorities, that might affect some of the Conservation Features."

The SLMC is experiencing increasing difficulty in providing informed advice to Government on the effects of various developments on the Lough's ecosystem, for the very simple reason that we ourselves are not informed about the status of the seabed. If we do not know what is down there in the first instance, how can we possibly comment on the effects of proposals on the seabed."

Subsequently the Committee wrote to key statutory authorities (Crown Estate Commissioners, Planning Service, DARD and EHS) to draw attention to the Committee's concerns for continued development in Strangford Lough in the absence of appropriate environmental information on which to assess those developments.

"Under the SAC designation authorities have a statutory responsibility to ensure that the Conservation Features are protected. This relates not just to EHS but to any authority that has the power to control development, regulate and / or manage activities, which have the potential to effect the Conservation Features.

Therefore the Committee is advising Government to act on the following recommendations:

- *That there should be a presumption against development until such time as adequate environmental information is available - expected in 2004*
- *That any current proposals should be reviewed and rigorously assessed but could proceed if deemed to be likely to have little adverse effect on the environment.*
In this case "current" refers to proposals already in place in April 2003.

Please note that "development" refers to a wide range of activities, from the laying of pipes on the seabed and housing development with the potential to effect water quality, to aquaculture and dredging associated with construction.

Please also note that authorities are already required to use the Precautionary Principal under the SAC designation. The Committee would seek reassurance that this Principal will be rigorously applied."

SLMC firmly believes that EHS, which has a statutory responsibility for the monitoring programme, should be seen to assert ownership of it, by taking a much more proactive role in directing monitoring activities and ensuring that a sound knowledge of the Lough's ecology is at the core of management decisions.

The Committee welcomes the fact that EHS commissioned an extensive and multi-faceted investigation into the change in the Lough's ecology. This study looks not just at the *Modiolus modiolus* communities, but at the whole of the Lough's ecology. At the time of going to print the Committee is awaiting the Report from the Strangford Lough Ecological Change Investigation (SLECI).

A very positive step towards marine management has been the setting up of an Aquatic Science Unit within EHS which will among other things foster expertise in marine monitoring and the assessment of developments and activities in the marine environment. The Committee played a role in convincing EHS of the need for such a focus within the Department. In March 2003 the Committee formally recommended to EHS:

"....that marine expertise is developed and expanded within EHS and that the interface between EHS and other Departments on marine issues is strengthened".

"While much marine research and monitoring may be contracted out by EHS, in-house expertise is required to develop an appropriate brief, assess competency and techniques used, query results and flag up management issues. Competent and suitably qualified staff are also essential when assessing the development and regulation of human activities with the potential to affect the marine environment."

The contribution that the new Unit will make to the management of Strangford Lough remains to be seen, but it is already providing a focus for the Ecological Investigation.

The Aquatic Science Unit's remit includes undertaking biological research, species and habitat surveys and monitoring of marine and freshwater conservation sites and providing scientific advice with regard to the marine and aquatic environment on planning consultations, notifiable operations, plans and projects within SACs, fishery licences, research permits, aquaculture, water discharge consents, etc.

TEMPORARY BAN ON MOBILE GEAR FISHING

In December 2003 DARD closed Strangford Lough to the use of mobile fishing gear used in trawling and dredging. This ban followed the release of an interim dive survey report from the SLECI, which had been commissioned by EHS and conducted by Queen's University, Belfast. The Report inferred that mobile fishing gear was a factor in the decline of one of the Lough's Conservation Features, ie, the biogenic reefs formed by its horse mussel communities.

Under EU legislation the relevant statutory authority, in this case DARD, was obliged to take measures to ensure that no further damage was caused to the Lough's horse mussel community and therefore closed the fishery.

The Committee supports the precautionary principle and agrees that an activity should be regulated if it is thought to be damaging to the environment. However the Committee is concerned that this temporary ban was not arrived at through a

strategic approach to management. If adequate monitoring had been in place the problem would have been acknowledged at an early stage, the decision of how to regulate would have been arrived at in a measured way, and stakeholders would have been better informed in advance of any action.

SLMC was not (and still has not been) made aware of the evidence leading to the decision to ban mobile gear and has urged Government to publish acceptance criteria for the re-opening of the fishery. The initial consultation period was extremely short and did not take into account that people would wish to consider the findings of the SLECI before commenting in detail on the ban and the future of the fishery. The Committee is also keen to ensure that fishermen are appropriately compensated for loss of earnings.

The lifting of the ban will depend on whether mobile gear fishing can be managed in such a way that it is sustainable in terms of maintaining / restoring the Conservation Feature. One of the problems in assessing the impact of the fishery on the Lough's Conservation Features to date has been the lack of information on fishing activity in Strangford Lough. Estimates of the levels of activity and the value of the fishery to the local economy vary enormously and so its economic and environmental impacts are difficult to assess.



Trawler

SHELLFISH POISONING - ALGAL TOXINS

In September 1999 high levels of Amnesic Shellfish Poisoning (ASP) toxins in Strangford Lough caused DARD to ban scallop fishing for a period of months under Food Protection regulations. Since then there have been intermittent bans and restrictions on scallop fishing due to the presence of high levels of algal toxins. The phenomenon is not confined to Strangford Lough, but is affecting a wide area.

It is thought that climate change may have contributed to this phenomenon though there may also be links to eutrophication

and a reduction in water quality. Changes in methodology for analysing samples and quality standards may also be contributing to the increase in levels detected in more recent years.

The Committee has recommended that this apparently new phenomenon is noted as a further indicator of change when assessing the overall changes in the Lough's ecology.

SUSTAINABLE SHELLFISH FARMING

Shellfish aquaculture is generally considered to be a benign activity in areas of high conservation value such as Strangford Lough. No chemicals or antibiotics are used in shellfish production and the industry relies on a high standard of water quality. With careful siting visual intrusion is minimal and the needs of other activities - particularly sailing, can be accommodated. The Committee has, however, considerable concerns at DARD's approach to developing aquaculture in the Lough.

The Committee set up an Aquaculture Working Group to examine aquaculture licence applications and to advise on a strategic approach to the development of the industry. With the advice of this Group the Committee has made the following recommendations:

- Appropriate baseline surveys of the seabed should be conducted before developing the industry.
- The effects of projects on the environment should be monitored.
- Cumulative impact assessment should be provided for new proposals.
- Any carrying capacity models should take account of environmental parameters for the Lough's Conservation Features.
- Boundaries for development should be set, which can be reviewed periodically to incorporate new information from monitoring and / or to take account of advances in the industry.
- The information provided in aquaculture applications should be improved so that they can be properly assessed. This would include information on the operation of the site.
- Operators should be encouraged to participate in voluntary operational codes that are in keeping with development in a Marine Nature Reserve.

Notwithstanding these comments licensing continues to proceed on a case by case basis. SLMC has queried DARD's role as a licensing authority. There has been at least one case where DARD granted a permit for light dredging outside the area zoned for dredging, even though they had not surveyed the area of seabed in question and were unable to clarify for the Committee what habitats and species were present in that area. The Committee is concerned that applications may be given consent without having the most basic understanding of the ecology of the area and the way in which the proposal may affect it. There are also growing concerns with regard to DARD'S management of the day to day operation of sites. There have been problems with the location of structures used in growing mussels outside the licensed areas, posing risks to yachts and other surface vessels.

SLMC continues to be very active in assessing the suitability of individual applications. It has made recommendations on the size and scale of developments, as well as on licence conditions, to reduce conflict with environmental interests and other Lough users. In addition, the Committee supports the use of voluntary codes of conduct for aquaculturists.

Aquaculture Working Group Members: Dave Allen, Dr Pat Boaden, Malcolm Carter, David Chamberlain, Newenham de Cogan, Hugh Edwards, Dr David Erwin, Sir Dennis Faulkner, Dick James, Philip Johnston, Renny McKeown, Caroline Nolan, Kenny Parker, Nick Stephens, Gil Stevenson, David Thompson.



Oysters Growing On Trestles

COLLECTING SHELLFISH ON THE SHORE

Members of the public, fishermen involved in native oyster ranching, and some of the local people involved in shore based collection of shellfish have raised concerns that the collection of shellfish on the shore has increased dramatically. There are concerns that this scale of activity may affect the sustainability of the fishery, disrupt shellfish ranching activities and be detrimental to the environment.

Since 2000 the Committee has pressed for regulation of the shore based collection of shellfish. Its activity included a submission and a presentation to the NI Assembly on the Fisheries (Amendment) Bill. The Committee supported the measure to allow DARD to regulate shellfish collection in the intertidal area. It also welcomed new powers for fishery regulators to make regulations for environmental purposes as well as for the protection and management of fisheries. The Committee drew attention to the conservation objectives of the Strangford Lough Management Scheme and urged Government to introduce regulatory orders to operate the fishery in such a way that Conservation Features, such as eel-grass, would not be damaged. The Committee also welcomed specific reference to archaeological interests in the Bill. At that time SLMC had recommended that "all means and methods of fishing" should come under the new regulations. This would have ensured that hand collection and dive collection, as well as mechanical harvesting of shellfish, would be regulated and could have allowed the development of a sustainable, managed fishery.

The Committee also recommended that the legislation should be extended to control the commercial harvesting and cultivation of seaweed, whether as part of this Bill or a subsequent Bill.

The Committee advised that fisheries and environmental legislation should be cross-referenced and that legislation should comply with EU environmental directives, and that compensation issues be examined.

Not all of the points raised by SLMC were addressed, however the Act was amended and regulatory orders were later developed which banned mechanical harvesting for shellfish in the intertidal area.

Further to the concerns raised though SLMC, EHS has commissioned a study into the levels of shore-based shellfish collection and its ecological effects. The results and recommendation of this study will indicate if there is a real threat to the environment and whether or not the fishery can be sustained. SLMC will endeavour to formulate further advice on the way forward once the findings of the study are available.



Cockles

SEALS



Adult Common Seal

Further to concerns that common seals were in steady decline (just over 200 adults counted in August 1999) the Committee formed a working group and ran an international workshop to formulate advice with regard to the monitoring and management of seals.

The SLMC Common Seal Research and Management Report was submitted to Government in 1999. This Report had emphasised the importance of continuing the Strangford Lough counts and made the following recommendations:

- Further data from around Irish coasts and County Down in particular would be useful in determining if population range is a factor. This might also indicate a link to food

supply.

- Research should focus specifically on the feeding habits of mother and pup pairs to try to establish why they leave the Lough before weaning.
- A study at key pupping sites in July and August would assess whether or not human activity is disturbing seals at their most sensitive time ie at pupping and moulting times.
- Grey seal / common seal interaction is a possible issue and should also be considered.

The Committee is pleased to note that EHS has continued the monthly counts in the Lough. Figures received from EHS state that the past five year average from counts in August (peak months for seal counts as they tend to spend more time hauled out) is 268. The number of pups counted is, however, continuing to decline with a 5-year average of 30 (up to 2003) and only 26 counted in 2003.

EHS has not, so far, supplied the Committee with data for County Down or the east coast of Ireland.

It would appear that further studies with regard to the possible factors affecting common seal numbers in the Lough have not been carried out.

Common seals were included in the revised list of Strangford Lough SAC Conservation Features submitted by EHS to the European Union. It will therefore be even more important to gain an understanding of how food supply and or disturbance by humans may be affecting the population.

Phocine Distemper

In October 2002 DARD Veterinary Service confirmed that a dead harbour (common) seal found at Tyrella, County Down, was infected with a *Morbilia* virus, the family of virus that cause phocine and canine distemper. Staff from the Strangford Lough Office were among the volunteers who assisted in the Northern Ireland response co-ordinated by Environment and Heritage Service. Government departments, local councils and non-government organisations were also involved. The intention was to monitor the progress of the disease, limit the suffering of

infected animals and ensure that carcasses were disposed of appropriately. About 16,000 seals had died from *Morbilia* virus infection in waters off continental Europe in the previous five months. Fortunately, however, there was no outbreak in Northern Ireland and patrols for dead or sick seals were stood down later in the year, though all reports of dead seals were investigated to provide a full calendar year of data.

ARDS AND DOWN AREA PLAN UPDATE



Ballydorn

In its comment on the Draft Ards and Down Area Plan 2015 in January 2003, the Committee raised concerns for development in areas prone to flooding. The Committee believes that such development would be almost certain to have a negative impact on shoreline habitat in terms of coastal squeeze of marginal vegetation and also possible effects on erosion patterns. It is

also very likely to result in a call for flood defences in the future, with associated costs from construction, maintenance and further negative impacts on the environment in the long term. Given, in addition, the possible rise in sea levels and the effects of increasing storm action, the Committee has queried the logic of building in such areas.

The Committee recommended that the proposal to expand Portaferry should not be progressed until such time as the new sewage treatment system is in place. The Committee welcomed the proposal to restrict the expansion of Newtownards southwards. It recommended measures to mitigate against noise / air pollution along the shore in view of the additional traffic flow along the A20. The Floodgates is a popular scenic and bird-watching area, but the high volume of traffic adjacent to it already mars public enjoyment. The Committee also raised the issue of runoff from this road which could have a polluting effect on the Lough and may need to be monitored / addressed in the future.

(See also SLMC's Third Report for the Committee's initial response to consultation).

INTEGRATED COASTAL MANAGEMENT IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The Department of the Environment has drawn on the extensive experience and knowledge of the SLMC and its Office in considering Integrated Coastal Management and it is envisaged that it will continue to play a role in wider discussions on this topic.

The Committee believes that it would be beneficial to raise the profile of coastal and marine management in Northern Ireland. It is also hoped that the focus on Integrated Coastal

Management will help to address issues which have been raised through SLMC, but which have implications for the whole of Northern Ireland.

PLANNING APPLICATIONS

Any Committee member may draw attention to relevant planning applications for consideration by the Planning Working Group and any other Members who express an interest in that application. The Committee has so far commented on up to 16 applications annually.

Planning Working Group Members: David Chamberlain, Lady Dorinda Dunleath, Joe Furphy, Robert Gibson, Hugh Charles Keating, Caroline Nolan, Gil Stevenson, David Thompson.

In December 2001 the Committee reviewed its policy with regard to commenting on planning applications to ensure a consistent approach. The following points were agreed:

- The Committee neither supports nor objects to individual planning applications. Rather, the role of SLMC is to highlight issues relevant to the consideration of the application, in terms of the likely effects on the Lough, including for example effects on its conservation interests, landscape value and the activities of other Lough users.
- The Committee will continue to comment on individual planning applications but only when :
 - a. the proposed development is within sight of Strangford Lough and these should be confined to:
 - any applications (large or small) in rural areas for housing or business developments with the exception of extensions, minor conversions or garages to existing properties;
 - developments in urban areas (i.e. associated with towns

or villages) which are likely to impact the Lough in terms of scale, water quality, disturbance etc;

- changes to the road system likely to affect the Lough through coastal defence or drainage,

or

- b. developments that are at some distance from the Lough, but could affect it functionally eg:
 - large developments where related discharges could have an impact on water quality down stream;
 - changes to the road system that could affect the scale and pace of development along that route;
 - large scale developments that could affect the area's overall scenic value and fundamentally change the character of the whole area.
 - SLMC should restrict its comments to scale, density, siting and landscaping of proposed developments.

Planning Service has said that it welcomes the Committee's measured and objective comment on applications and stated that they valued the information and insight that the Committee provides. The Minister for the Environment also clearly recognises the contribution made by the Committee and in 2004 confirmed that Planning Service should continue to supply the Committee with copies of relevant applications, without charge, even though SLMC is not a statutory consultee.



Killyleagh

WATER QUALITY

It is hoped that the SLECI report (see page 1) and the implementation of the Water Framework Directive will provide better information on the effect of agriculture and sewage on the water quality of Strangford Lough and associated streams. There have been increasing complaints of localised problems with odour and algal growth associated with increased nutrient levels and biological oxygen demand. In some places water quality is known to have deteriorated as areas have been downgraded under the Shellfish Waters classification. This has economic implications for shellfish growing as well as ecological effects.

Sewage Treatment Works

The Strangford Lough Management Committee is firmly of the view that housing development should not take place until such time as sewerage systems discharging into the Lough are upgraded to cope with the load.



Sewer Pipe

The Committee has expressed concerns that some developments may be given permission to proceed on the basis that they will not be occupied until the sewage treatment infrastructure is in place. The experience in Strangford Lough has been that buildings will be occupied once the construction is complete. In Greyabbey in 1994, a development of 51 houses was built and partly occupied before an adequate system was in place - despite reassurances to the contrary. In April 2003 the Committee wrote to the Minister for the Environment to draw attention to the importance of having appropriate infrastructure in place before housing developments are given Planning Permission.

"The Committee would ask the Minister to consider this case of Strangford Lough in the wider context of Environment Minister, Mr Dermot Nesbitt's announcement in October 2002 that DOE's Planning Service would henceforth process planning

applications which had previously been held on a precautionary basis, due to concerns about sewerage issues. At that time only 35% of Northern Ireland's sewage treatment systems met EU standards."

The letter went on to ask that this situation be reviewed, particularly in Strangford Lough, where a high standard of water quality is essential to the shellfish aquaculture industry, for recreational users, and to maintain the Lough's internationally renowned wildlife.

"Strangford Lough is a Marine Nature Reserve, a candidate Special Area of Conservation, a Special Protection Area, and its shores are Areas of Special Scientific Interest. Any loss of water quality in such a marine site is unacceptable..."

The Minister's response did not make any commitment to a general principle of limiting development until sewage treatment facilities are upgraded.

The Quoile Pondage

The Committee has become increasingly concerned at the poor water quality reported in the Quoile Pondage. Sewage effluent and agricultural run-off appear to be the main problems. This is a matter for the attention of the incoming Committee in 2004. The Committee has also commented on proposals to repair the Quoile barrage and in particular has recommended that efforts are made to include an effective fish pass.



Quoile Pondage

Portaferry Sewage Treatment Works

There are continued delays with the upgrading of the sewage treatment works at Portaferry. Department for Regional Development - Water Service has still not confirmed the proposed location for the works and say that negotiations are ongoing.

The Committee had been very critical of the way in which the initial proposed sites had been selected and drew attention to the many flaws in the design report that had been commissioned by Water Service. The Committee welcomed the Department's efforts to take into account the input of the Committee and others since that report was produced.

In response to further consultation in March 2001 the Committee made the following general points:

- It is essential that the water quality in Strangford Lough is brought to the highest standard. Discharging into a stream should not be an option.
- Sites north or east of the town are preferable in terms of avoiding odour impacts to the town and / or the shorefront due to the direction of the prevailing winds.
- Whichever site is selected the visual impact should be minimised by placing the building underground and by planting to screen the building and the access road. Consideration should also be given to the choice of road surface. Any consideration of the shore sites should take account not only of visual impact from the road, but also when viewed from the shore or the water or other vantage points.

- The traffic disruption during construction is short term and therefore is not of such great concern as the long-term operational effects. The priority would be to ensure that the work was conducted over the shortest time period possible, outside of the main tourism season, and that all road surfaces be reinstated.
- Any assessment of the sites to the north east of the town requires consideration of the future development needs of the town.

Unfortunately three years later (and more than a decade since SLMC first raised the issue) there has still been no confirmation of the site by Water Service and the Committee has received no further information on the proposed works.

Kircubbin / Greyabbey

The Committee welcomes the upgrading of the sewage treatment works at Greyabbey and Kircubbin and notes that the Department acknowledged many of the points raised during consultation.

TIDAL ENERGY

Under the Food and Environmental Protection Act (FEPA) a licence application has been submitted for marine construction works in the Strangford Lough Narrows to develop marine current turbine technology. This new technology is part of a move towards renewable and pollution free energy and the proposal is therefore welcomed by the Committee in principle. However, the very experimental nature of this proposal demands a cautious approach.

The Committee is supportive of the proposal for an experimental marine current turbine in the Narrows. However, this support is subject to the results of a full environmental impact assessment. It is also based on the understanding that if the project goes ahead its effects will be monitored closely at every stage and that should the development be seen to adversely affect the environment it will not be allowed to proceed.

The Committee has raised concerns with regard to safe navigation and visual amenity as well as querying if noise levels are likely to affect either humans or marine mammals.

The developer has appointed consultants to undertake a full environmental impact assessment, which should be available for consultation later this year.



The Narrows

AIDS TO NAVIGATION

SLMC's Third Report outlined the background to the Strangford Lough - Aids to Navigation Report, produced by Kirk, McClure, Morton in December 2000.

This report recommended a system of aids to navigation that would guide vessels into and out of the Lough to and from the main mooring areas. It also identified that the responsibility for aids to navigation in the Narrows area of the Lough is shared between the DRD, Down District Council and Ards Borough Council who, together, are recognised as the Local Lighthouse Authority (LLA) by the Commissioners for Irish Lights (CIL). However, this LLA does not operate outside the area of the Narrows.

SLMC, with the support of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and the CIL, proposed that the LLA responsibility should be extended geographically to cover the provision of aids to assist the safe passage of vessels to the main mooring areas in the Lough.

Both local councils have supported the work done by SLMC to date, however they would look to central government to play a lead role in taking the proposal forward.

DRD - Road Service has confirmed that it undertakes a Local Lighthouse Authority responsibility in the Narrows area in co-operation with local councils. Its responsibilities relate to the

safe operation of the Strangford - Portaferry Ferry.

At the time of going to print the Commissioners of Irish Lights are seeking a meeting with the key players to try to address, not just the need for improved navigational aids, but also the hazard posed by some existing "unofficial" marks.

There is widespread concern for safety and the likely repercussions if a major accident occurs in an area which is being promoted for tourism and water based recreation. There is also concern that the effectiveness of investment in tourism / recreation promotion and facility provision is greatly reduced by the lack of appropriate lights and marks.



Town Rock - A Navigation Beacon From Yesteryear To Guide Sailing Ships To The Port Of Killyleagh

DEALING WITH EMERGENCY POLLUTION INCIDENTS

Marine Environmental High Risk Areas

Despite its high environmental status Strangford Lough has not been listed as a Marine Environmental High Risk Area (MEHRA) which would have introduced the possibility of requesting shipping vessels to keep clear of the mouth of the Lough. This is because the area outside the Lough is not deemed to have a high level of shipping traffic.

SLMC has asked DOE to supply further information on shipping levels and cargoes in the area of the Irish Sea outside the Narrows.

Contingency Plans

The SLMC's Emergency Pollution Incident Response Working Group has been the focus for discussions relevant to emergency pollution incident planning in Strangford Lough and has also worked to ensure that Strangford Lough is prioritised by Government Departments.

Emergency Incident Response Planning Working Group

Members: Kerry Anderson, Malcolm Carter, Caroline Nolan, Gil Stevenson, David Thompson.

The Committee has urged authorities to make preparations for dealing with a possible major pollution incident in the Lough. The main concern is that pollutants could be carried into the Lough from the Irish Sea on an incoming tide. EHS has put in place booming plans for the Northern Ireland coastline, but these would be completely ineffective with the tidal regime in Strangford Lough. There is also the possibility of contamination from accidents involving containers of pollutants on adjacent roads or on the ferry.

SLMC has commented on the Department's booming plans and has also contributed to a Marine and Coastal Awareness Seminar run by the MCA in May 2000 and an event held by the Northern Ireland Regional Forum (MCA and Institute of Petroleum) in November 2002.

In addition, SLMC in collaboration with the EHS - Pollution Control team ran a Contingency Planning workshop in October 2002. The event was attended by SLMC members, officers from the local councils and Government Departments. It examined the specific risks in Strangford Lough, the nature and location of environmental and economic assets and the implications of booming oil at the entrance to the Lough. All of this will inform the EHS local contingency plan for Strangford Lough. It also provided a knowledge base within the Department for use should the need arise before the contingency plans are in place. The Department has agreed to consult SLMC further on the draft contingency plans when they are available.

SLMC was instrumental in encouraging EHS to involve the wider community in emergency incident response planning and welcomes the Department's efforts to involve the relevant organisations through consultation and workshops. The Committee recommends that more work is done to involve local councils particularly as they are developing their own emergency response plans which will include marine pollution

response and it is essential that these are consistent with the plans being produced by EHS.

The Committee continues to recommend that an exercise be carried out on Strangford Lough to test the reality of working in areas with such difficult access and tide conditions as those found in Strangford Lough.

A Northern Ireland Environment Group has been formed as part of the National Contingency Plan to advise those involved in shoreline clean-up. The core members of the Group are EHS Natural Heritage and DARD Fisheries (The Committee is awaiting a full list of members from EHS). SLMC has recommended that the representatives on this Group pay a site visit to Strangford Lough and meet with SLMC's Emergency Incident Working Group to familiarise themselves with the specific environmental and other issues relevant to cleaning up the Lough's shores. The Committee is of the firm opinion that areas of high conservation value such as Strangford Lough should be given special consideration by this Group.

REGULATION OF ACTIVITIES

Legislation provides a useful (and often necessary) framework for area management, however it is also fundamentally important for local people and other stakeholders to develop voluntary regulation and locally adapted management.

In October 2001 SLMC commissioned consultants to run a workshop to survey views as to how some activities might be developed and managed. The results of this workshop will help to inform the SAC / SPA Management Scheme Action Plan.

While SLMC does not have operational responsibility it will continue to advise on the development and implementation of voluntary codes in association with different interest groups as part of the overall strategic management of the area.



Canoeists In Strangford Lough

STRANGFORD LOUGH INFORMATION NETWORK

The Strangford Lough Information Network was initiated by the SLMC as part of its commitment to provide clear and objective information about Strangford Lough and its management.

The Network is directed through the Strangford Lough Office and brings together the two local councils, EHS, The National Trust, the Ulster Wildlife Trust and others to meet communication needs. By 2001 it had produced booklets, education posters and a website on the Lough. The website (www.strangfordlough.org) was the Overall Winner at the prestigious Northern Ireland Web Awards 2001 and also won in the Education Category.

The Network completed its first round of projects in 2002 with the installation of outdoor information panels at 22 sites around the Lough.

The Network launched a [Strangford Lough interactive CD](#) in 2003. This has been circulated free of charge to about one hundred schools and youth groups in the area. In addition, a computer interactive based on the CD is touring visitor attractions around the Lough. The interactive takes people on an exploration of the shore with marine biologists as guides. On behalf of the Network the Committee would like to thank Dr Pat Boaden and Dr Lynn Browne for their help in making this CD. The schools' version includes worksheets and information geared towards the National Curriculum.

An annual Spring-Clean of the Lough, co-ordinated through the Strangford Lough Office has also come under the Network's banner. Litter is a killer as well as an eyesore and thousands of marine animals die every year from entanglement in, or swallowing, bits of plastic, netting and other debris discarded by people. The message from the Spring-Clean is to reduce the amount of rubbish produced and never throw it into the sea. The Spring-Clean has gone from strength to strength with more and more people taking part each year - over 500 in 2003. It involves Ards Borough Council, Down District Council, Environment and Heritage Service, Exploris, The National Trust, the Strangford Lough Management Committee, the Ulster Wildlife Trust and the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust. Staff from these organisations lead the clean-ups and are on hand to talk about the shore and its wildlife.

All of the bodies involved in the Network have enthusiastically confirmed their continued support. Future plans for the Network (subject to funding) include communication relevant to voluntary and other regulation of activities, and the development of the Strangford Lough Geographic Information System.



Launch Of Strangford Lough Information Network Information Panels May 2002 With Environment Minister Mr Dermot Nesbitt (Fourth From Right)

EVENTS AND WORKSHOPS 2000-2004

Every year the Strangford Lough Office, on behalf of the Committee, organises a number of events and workshops. These events are opportunities to consolidate the holistic approach to the Lough's management and usually involve staff from the Committee's member organisations, Government Departments and specialists on particular topics where appropriate.

Some of these events help to inform the activities of the Committee and other organisations eg the Emergency Pollution Incident Workshop run in collaboration with Environment and Heritage Service in 2002. Other events are geared to give those involved in the Lough's management a better understanding of the site and the issues relevant to its management eg Site Familiarisation boat trips.

- | | |
|--|--------------------|
| - Launch of the Strangford Lough Information Network and its first publications - "Out and About around Strangford Lough" and "Who's Who Directory" | - June 2000 |
| - Environmental Monitoring Workshop in collaboration with EHS | - August 2000 |
| - Site Familiarisation Boat Trip | - October 2000 |
| - Launch of Strangford Lough on line www.strangfordlough.org , education posters and the Strangford Lough Management Committee's Third Report | - June 2001 |
| - Site Familiarisation Boat Trip | - August 2001 |
| - Launch of the Strangford Lough Special Area of Conservation / Special Protection Area Management Scheme on behalf of EHS | - October 2001 |
| - Access to the Lough Workshop | - October 2001 |
| - Wardening Collaboration Workshop | - March 2002 |
| - Litter Workshop | - April 2002 |
| - Launch of the Strangford Lough Spring-Clean 2002 and Information Panels | - May 2002 |
| - Tackling the issue of dumping around Strangford Lough Workshop | - September 2002 |
| - Website Development Workshop | - September 2002 |
| - Emergency Pollution Incident Response Workshop in conjunction with EHS | - October 2002 |
| - Strangford Lough Spring-Clean 2003 | - March/April 2003 |
| - Strangford Lough Spring-Clean 2003 Celebration Event and Launch of "Explore the Shores of Strangford Lough" CD | - April 2003 |



Experts Share Their Knowledge Of The Lough On A Site Familiarisation Boat Trip

CONSULTATION DOCUMENTS RECEIVED

2001 - 2004

The Committee regularly receives Government documents for consultation as part of its formal role to advise on the management of Strangford Lough. Responses are produced following appropriate discussion between Committee Members and the Officer. Copies of consultation documents and SLMC Responses may be viewed in the Strangford Lough Office by appointment.

January 2001	Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 - Proposals to introduce a cost recovery scheme covering application fees and annual charges for discharges to waterways and underground strata.
January 2001	The Department of the Environment's proposal to implement its powers and functions in the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999
January 2001	Telecommunications - Proposals to amend Part 17 of Schedule 1 to the Planning (General Development) Order (Northern Ireland)
March 2001	Ards and Down Area Plan 2015 Issues Paper
March 2001	Consultation on Proposals For A Restrictive Licensing Scheme For Shellfish
April 2001	Partners in Protection - A Review Of the Procedures For Notifying, Protecting and Managing Areas of Special Scientific Interest in Northern Ireland - Consultation Document
June 2001	European Commission Green Paper on Review of the Common Fisheries Policy
June 2001	Public Consultation Draft - Development Control Advice Note 4 - Restaurants, Cafes and Fast Food Outlets
June 2001	Scallop Technical Conservation Measures
June 2001	Strangford Lough (Prohibition of Fishing for Shellfish) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2001
August 2001	Public Consultant Document - Planning Policy Statement 11 - Planning and Waste Management *
August 2001	Partners for change - Government's Strategy for support of the voluntary and community sector (2001-2004) *
October 2001	The Department of the Environment's proposal to introduce regulations for the control of pollution (silage, slurry and agricultural fuel oil) regulations (Northern Ireland) 2001
May 2002	Consultation Paper on Recovery and Recycling Targets in Northern Ireland for Packaging Waste in 2002 *
May 2002	A Proposal of the European Parliament and of the Council to amend the Directive on Packaging and Packaging Waste *
May 2002	The Department of the Environment's Proposal to Introduce Regulations for The Water Supply (Water Quality) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002 *
May 2002	Environmental Liability with Regard to the Prevention and Remedying of Environmental Damage - Consultation Paper *
June 2002	Modernising Planning Processes - A Consultation Paper
July 2002	Down District Council - Cultural Development Strategy
September 2002	Implementation of Directive 2001/18/EC on the deliberate release of genetically modified organisms into the environment: Consultation on new Northern Ireland regulations *
September 2002	Promoting Sustainable Living - A Discussion Paper on Proposals for a Sustainable Development Strategy for Northern Ireland *
September 2002	Proposals to introduce a cost recovery scheme covering annual charges for discharges to waterways and underground strata and for application fees for discharge consent under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 *
September 2002	Review of the Common Fisheries Policy *
December 2002	Microbiological criteria for foodstuffs in European legislation - criteria for live bivalve molluscs and fishery products
December 2002	Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: A strategy for the sustainable development of European aquaculture (COM (2002) 511) final
December 2002	Draft Programme for Government
January 2003	Draft Planning Policy Statement PPS12 - Housing in Settlements
February 2003	Seas of Change - the Government's consultation paper to help deliver our vision for the marine environment
March 2003	PPS3 - Access, Movement and Parking
April 2003	UK Small Cetacean Bycatch Response Strategy *
April 2003	EC Water Framework Directive - Joint North/South Consultation paper *
October 2003	Modernising Planning Processes - Review of Permitted Developments

CONSULTATION DOCUMENTS RECEIVED 2001 - 2004 (CONT.)

October 2003	Modernising Planning Processes - Review of the Use classes order *
November 2003	EC Water Framework Directive - Third Consultation Paper *
November 2003	Proposals for Additional Designations Under The Freshwater Fish Directive 78/659/EEC *
November 2003	The Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2004
January 2004	Proposals to introduce new fees structure for licences issued under the Food and Environment Protection Act (FEPA) 1985 *
January 2004	Closure of Strangford Lough to Mobile Fishing Gear
February 2004	Drainage (Northern Ireland) Order 1973 Drainage (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2001 - Quoile Tidal Barrier

* document examined but no comment made

SLMC TERMS OF REFERENCE

1. The Strangford Lough Management Committee (SLMC) will provide advice to Government on the future management of Strangford Lough having regard to:-
 - i. the maintenance and, where possible, the enhancement of the marine and terrestrial environments and particularly the conservation of:
 - the native flora and fauna,
 - the richness and diversity of natural habitats, communities and species,
 - the scenic quality of the landscape,
 - the man-made heritage.
 - ii. the provision of opportunities for study, research, education and interpretation of a maritime ecosystem;
 - iii. the monitoring of the environment for signs of deterioration and for damage, identifying the causes and taking corrective action;
 - iv. meeting the needs and enhancing the surroundings of those who live and work in the area and providing continuing opportunities for employment and recreation including tourism; and
 - v. integration of new developments into the countryside in a manner that does not compromise the beauty of the area, or its natural or man made heritage.
2. SLMC's main task will be the development of management proposals for the Lough area. In particular, SLMC will advise on the production and implementation of strategic management plans relating to all conservation designations, including: Special Area of Conservation; Special Protection Area; Ramsar site; Marine Nature Reserve; Areas of Special Scientific Interest; and Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
3. Advise the Department on the extension of management plans to take in the wider area and full range of uses which may fall outside the ambit of the designations.
4. SLMC will be consulted on any designations or other substantive proposals by Government or Local Government relating to the Lough area.
5. SLMC will draw to the attention of Government, Local Government or any other relevant body any matters of concern to the SLMC.
6. SLMC may invite officers of Government and Local Government working in the relevant departments to attend meetings to discuss and to make presentations on specific agenda items.
7. SLMC will continue to be serviced by a Strangford Lough Officer with appropriate administration and secretarial support. SLMC will be involved with Government in the selection of this Officer as and when a vacancy arises. The Officer and administrative back-up will be located in a suitable office, at present 13 The Strand, Portaferry. The main function of the SLMC Office is to accommodate the Secretariat and act as a main interface with the public.
8. SLMC will, amongst other things: -
 - i. advise on additional measures to conserve the Lough and its surroundings;
 - ii. consider new issues relevant to the Lough as they arise;
 - iii. review the management of the Lough and its effectiveness in achieving objectives;
 - iv. provide appropriate information concerning the Lough and its environs to the public and others.
9. Advise Government on any matter relating to the management of Strangford Lough.

APPENDIX A

Further information on Horse Mussel Communities in Strangford Lough

What are Horse Mussels?

Horse mussels are not the blue common mussels that we eat - they are larger and are brown / black in colour. They are found in the central and northern part of the Lough, their hard shells part buried in the soft mud sediment.

Why are they important?

Horse mussels provide a hard surface for other things to grow on, in an otherwise soft muddy area. Other creatures also hide and shelter in the crevices and niches of clumps of horse mussels. About 100 other species depend on them. Where you find horse mussels the seabed abounds with life. In Strangford Lough the communities had been particularly rich and were thought to have built up over thousands of years.

Shells of the horse mussels are clothed in other animals and plants such as hydroids or sea firs, whose shape and branches resemble tiny fir trees, and sea squirts, which are miniature water siphons. Larger creatures include octopus and angler fish (or monkfish), spider crabs and squat lobsters. Other creatures found there include sea anemones, sponges, peacock worms, brittle stars whose feathery legs stretch up off the sea bed floor catching bits of passing food in the water, and colourful sea slugs. Two kinds of scallop are found among the horse mussels: the variable scallop and the queen scallop. The latter is fished commercially.

"Queenie" scallops that have been fished in the Lough are among the associated species. Whether the decline in recent years in the "Queenies" caught in the Lough is directly related to the decline in the horse mussel beds has not been clarified. Part of the horse mussel beds lay outside the trawling zone and part within the zone. Even those areas outside the fishing zone may have played an important part in recruitment ie the production of new scallops.

In the absence of horse mussels the seabed may revert to mud, with very few species able to live there (though it should be stressed that the long-term effects are unknown). We have lost part of the Lough's biodiversity and there may be repercussions for other kinds of wildlife as the Lough's ecosystem is very complex. At this stage it is not known if restoration would be feasible or likely to be successful.



Horse Mussel Community (In Decline)

